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Assessment and Facilitation in Accreditation: Experiential Learning in the Undergraduate Work Based Learning Programme

Barbara Workman

Candidate number: 2348459

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Assessment and Facilitation in Accreditation: Experiential learning in the Undergraduate Work Based Learning Programme

Barbara A. Workman MSc, BSc(Hons)

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Abstract

This action research project explored the process of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) within the Work Based Learning Programme at Middlesex University. Four action research cycles were completed, in which data was generated from one cycle to inform the next. The first cycle evaluated the APEL module from the undergraduate student's perspective, while the second gathered the tacit knowledge of assessment, facilitation and accreditation from the perspective of the academic advisers. Using the findings from these cycles, criteria to assess the credit volume in APEL were devised and trialled with colleagues, and then integrated into the teaching and learning materials for the module. Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from student questionnaires, interviews with academics and documents such as examples of student work.

The students' experiences of APEL supported previous anecdotes and findings from the literature, demonstrating largely positive experiences such as increased self-confidence and a beneficial impact upon their work and personal lives, with increased ability for reflective learning. Issues relating to difficulty with academic language and differing expectations regarding the outcome of credit awarded for APEL claims emerged as areas for development, and some changes to programme information were made. The interviews with academics captured extensive tacit knowledge, experience and facilitation practices and contributed to the development of learning and teaching materials to support APEL at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Guidance for academics and students to facilitate the development of APEL claims was written and incorporated into student resources and information packs for the Centre for Excellence in Work Based Learning. The project will inform the future use and application of APEL in both traditional and work based learning programmes.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Learning through experience and having it recognised as being significant and consequently acknowledged by academic accreditation within a Higher Education (HE) programme is a phenomenon that has been growing and evolving in the UK over the last three decades. It has widened participation in HE, thus meeting the government's agenda, and encouraged non-traditional students to access undergraduate and postgraduate study. At Middlesex University (MU), accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) is situated within the subject area of work based learning (WBL) in HE, and is used within a range of undergraduate and postgraduate work based learning programmes, providing an access point to HE since the early 1990s. This action research project is the product of reflection upon and consideration of accreditation processes within WBL during the last three years. It is the culmination of several years of personal and professional experience of accreditation, as well as formal research activities centred on the process. This report will explore the processes by which learning by experience is recognised and accredited within the WBL programmes at MU, particularly within the undergraduate programme. It will trace the progressive development of criteria to assist assessment of experiential learning, and explore other factors relevant to both students and staff in relation to accreditation, thereby validating their experiences and improving academic practice.

This chapter will outline the context of the project in terms of the university and the wider educational context in which accreditation of work based and experiential learning occurs. It will justify the component parts of the project, as well as explain my position, role and responsibilities in the project.

The Context of the Project and my Role

The project arose from my work in the Work Based Learning and Accreditation Unit (WBLAU) in the School of Health and Social Sciences (HSSc). I became involved with WBL soon after it started in the HSSc about eight years ago. I have been working across the two school boundaries, liaising regularly with colleagues in the National Centre of Work Based Learning Partnerships (NCWBLP) in the School of Lifelong

Learning and Education (LLE) so that the approach to WBL has been consistent, as well as providing key links between the schools for the delivery and development of the curriculum, thus providing opportunities to get to know both teams and appreciate the idiosyncrasies of the WBL programme in general and accreditation in particular. I have been facilitating and assessing accreditation claims for undergraduate and postgraduate students within the health care discipline, and providing mentorship for new WBL staff. I have also acted as a resource for colleagues in the HSSc for consultation on issues of accreditation in professional health programmes within environment and sports science and other subjects such as alternative medicine, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Therefore, I have gained a wide experience of using the WBL framework across a variety of programmes and am well versed in the transferability and potential difficulties of the programme. These skills have also been used with my knowledge of curriculum development to advise organisations in devising accredited programmes for staff development in the workplace. My knowledge and experience in this area was formally recognised in 2004 when I was appointed to the role of Student Accreditation Coordinator within the HSSc.

The Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in WBL

Issues regarding assessment of academic credit have therefore been part of my daily work for some time. However, the opportunity to explore this more fully came in April 2005, when NCWBLP and the WBLAU in the HSSc were awarded a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) in Work Based Learning (CEWBL) to extend the concept and components of WBL across the university. I was appointed to the post of Head of Academic Operations in the CEWBL in July 2005, which immediately increased my sphere of influence within the university. Since then it has become apparent that a number of external agencies (such as other CETLs) are interested in our accreditation knowledge. For example, another CETL in Practice Based Learning within the Open University is interested in accreditation of prior learning, and are keen to work with us to meet both CETLs' objectives. This indicates that outcomes from this study have the potential to be adopted or adapted elsewhere.

This project contributes to my Doctorate in Professional Studies as it draws together and further develops curriculum initiatives that I have been involved in and have made RAL (Recognition and Accreditation of Learning) claims for at the beginning. I made a

level 5 RAL claim for leadership and collaboration in writing and editing two books in relation to nursing skills and WBL in health care. This project builds upon the learning that was identified as I took a leadership role to steer the project through its phases, working collaboratively to complete it. My understanding and knowledge of the WBL curriculum were essential to this project, because my expertise and influence in the subject area provided academic leadership. As Academic Manager in the CEWBL, it was my responsibility to ensure that the findings from this project were widely disseminated as part of the CEWBL objectives, and that they were clearly accessible to both academics and future claimants, both in hard copy and electronically. The intention was to impact APEL practice across the university, and influence accreditation practices outside the university, initially through the CETL networks, but also later through other established WBL networks.

During the first two years of the CEWBL project, the main emphasis was on the contribution of APEL and WBL projects within the wider HE context, and therefore this investigation into the APEL processes and activities is timely. It will demonstrate that the CEWBL has explored local practice in order to improve and understand it further and therefore, as a centre of excellence, contribute to the wider debate about features of APEL.

Background

Accreditation of experiential learning started in the 1970s in America with, what became, the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL). Community colleges particularly engaged with it as a way of including mature students in formal education (Garnett *et al*., 2004), and it was imported into the UK in 1979 by Norman Evans (Evans, 1994). In 1986, Evans founded the Learning from Experience Trust, which championed the use of APEL within programmes in HE to attract mature students to HE to counteract a decline in traditional school leavers entering university. The opportunity to reflect upon and review learning and achievements from the world of work enabled students to clarify their personal goals and to gain access to university (Peters, 2004). In due course, this access route became one that also recognised the learning achieved outside HE by awarding academic credit towards a chosen programme of university study. This process was expedited by the introduction of modularisation and the credit rating of academic programmes in the 1990s (Garnet *et*

al., 2004), as these provided a structure by which amounts of credit could be slotted into a university programme at levels that reflected HE throughout a degree. Current views on APEL suggest that it is an underused tool, which can be effective in extending HE to new kinds of students and innovative learning partnerships, even though universities differ significantly in their approach to and adoption of APEL (Merrifield *et al*., 2000).

APEL is associated with HE credit schemes and is a vehicle whereby learning outside the university is formally recognised and given HE credit (Walsh and Johnson, 2001), whether the learning is acquired through formally assessed courses or through work and life experiences. It is recognised quite widely for entry to HE, and in some cases provides advanced standing against a given HE award, thus providing the opportunity to shorten formal programmes of study where prior learning is counted as significant. There is usually a limit as to how much prior learning an individual can bring into an academic programme, varying between 50-66% of the final award (Walsh and Johnson, 2001). At MU, accreditation of learning external to the university is allowed for up to 66% of an academic award, although some programmes (particularly those with professional body requirements) may have specific requirements or core modules which limit the amount of APEL that can be used.

The inherent features of APEL are academic recognition of experiential learning, and assessment. It requires measurement activities within an assessment process that relate to two key factors: the volume of credit and the level of difficulty, which reflect academic level equivalence to undergraduate or postgraduate learning. This project will explore how the volumes of credit within APEL claims are assessed, as this is a factor particularly pertinent to MU claimants. The MU WBL programme allows claimants to construct their own undergraduate or postgraduate programme, beginning with recognising and accrediting their experiential learning from work or life (including formal and informal learning experiences), thus starting with a specific amount of credit from which to build an individualised programme. This approach is also applicable to APEL practice in other higher education institutions (HEIs), as elsewhere claimants have to determine the size of their claims before they submit them (e.g. University of Portsmouth, 2006), whereas at MU the assessor determines the credit volume of the claim after submission. Therefore, a wider application of this project holds possibilities for APEL practitioners elsewhere in HE and will contribute to the

knowledge, skills and practice of academic accreditation of learning in the wider national and international academic community.

APEL at Middlesex University

At MU, the process of introducing and using APEL began differently to other HEIs. A research project undertaken by MU exploring the 'curriculum in the workplace' in the early 1990s found that learning was organised and built upon the activities and relationships at work, which Portwood (2000:17) articulated as "learning is work based and conversely the work is learning based". Workers had to demonstrate appropriate learning in order to be appointed to a particular job, but then had to improve their proficiency and knowledge in order to remain in that post (Portwood, 2000). This perspective became the basis from which the WBL studies programmes developed, ranging from undergraduate to postgraduate and, from the late 1990s, doctorate level study. The introduction of modularisation and credit transfer schemes contributed to the success of the programme, as they provided a framework in which programmes could be structured using a straightforward but innovative approach of four main curriculum components, which built upon the claimant's experience, with the content proscribed by personal and professional learning needs.

These programmes have been successfully running within a niche, non-traditional student and mature learner market since starting in 1993. However, only some corporate programmes have been evaluated, but not the whole curriculum as the academic achievement of students and financial solvency has been a marker of success. Additionally, the introduction of a successful doctorate programme in the late 1990s met a strong market need, and its uniqueness lies in the use of APEL at doctorate level. Nevertheless, this lack of evaluation and research by the NCWBLP should be addressed. Undertaking the investigation of the WBL curriculum will contribute to the weight of evidence supporting the positive contribution of WBL to MU and HE in general and to APEL in particular.

Accordingly, the learning, teaching and facilitation practices involved in APEL will be explored. Academics know from student anecdotes and facilitator observations that the experiences of assembling a claim are powerful and confidence building (Merrifield *et al*., 2000), empowering (Gregory, 1994) and cathartic (Heron, 1992), but there is little

published research that focuses on the learners' experiences to validate or confirm these observations. An investigation of the student experience will be undertaken so that the perceived impact upon their learning, confidence and work can be formally recognised and acknowledged as evidence that values accreditation within HE programmes. Additionally, local appraisal of undergraduate credit claims suggest that the amount of credit awarded can have a significant impact upon the completion and success rate of undergraduate WBL students (Bain, 2005, personal communication). By determining factors that promote successful accreditation claims, the potential credits can be maximised.

The key participants within this study are the 'claimants' or 'students', together with their facilitators who are academics, but who may take on the roles of subject 'adviser', 'facilitator' or 'assessor' of APEL claims, and who may undertake all or some of these roles for each individual claimant. As such, for the purposes of consistency throughout this report the participants will be referred to either as 'claimant' or as 'academic' unless they are assuming a specific role in the process of the claim.

By exploring the claimant's experience when preparing a claim, a review of academic practice in the APEL module will be undertaken and anecdotal reports about the impact of APEL upon personal and professional lives verified. Investigating the experiences of both the claimants and academics during the accreditation process should improve the future facilitation of APEL for both parties and positively influence practice, internally within the university as well as externally in the wider academic community. As part of the CEWBL's agenda, the teaching and learning activities of APEL will be explored, thus enabling the collective knowledge and facilitation techniques of experienced academics to be articulated, enabling the identification and expression of good practice, and sharing of standards and expertise. This, is turn, will provide the opportunity to produce guidance for academics and information for claimants undertaking the module.

The Focus of this Project

Although APEL at MU is used at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, this project is focused upon the undergraduate WBL curriculum. Elsewhere, APEL is most commonly used in undergraduate programmes and therefore the resultant accreditation criteria and practice advice would have a greater transferability and applicability to

other HEIs. Secondly, undergraduates may make APEL claims for up to two thirds of their programme and this can be a major challenge for the non-traditional students that the WBL programmes attract. By improving the advice and guidance to undergraduates, accreditation claims could be maximised and thereby increase the amount of credit awarded at the outset of the programme, thus reducing the time that their studies will take. Thirdly, the local context of the project is within the CEWBL funded by the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) which primarily supports undergraduate programmes, and so this will contribute to good undergraduate teaching and learning practice. Finally, the objectives for the first two years of the CEWBL include dissemination of good practice and enhancement of the expertise of university staff involved with APEL (NCWBLP, 2004), and this is applicable to the whole university, whose main body of work is the undergraduate student.

WBL as a Field of Study

MU's unusual approach to WBL is rooted in the central position of APEL and Accredited Prior Learning (APL) within the WBL programmes. WBL at MU is considered to be a 'field of study' or subject area, rather than just a 'mode' of study (Portwood, 2000), allowing claimants to create their own negotiated study programmes, starting from APEL. Experiential learning from a wide range of work activities, both paid and unpaid, can therefore be used not only to meet formal subject discipline outcomes in order to be awarded 'specific'[1] credit (although not in a specific programme), but can also be used to award 'general'[2] credit, which may be linked to a subject discipline. Other HEIs may award academic credit only at the level and volume that is mirrored in their subject curricula, but this may mean that an individual's significant learning is discounted because it does not meet the requirements of a formal programme. At MU, WBL provides the opportunity to identify significant areas of experiential learning, supported by a sound case for inclusion within an individual's programme, with negotiated curriculum content. Therefore, awards in WBL studies can be highly original and unique in content, reflecting the claimant's own learning needs and subject preferences, and responsive to their particular work demands.

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1 Specific credit matches specific learning outcomes from programmes which the claimant has chosen to demonstrate s/he has the equivalent learning from a source other than through taught programmes in the university.

2 General credit is awarded for learning demonstrated by the claimant, and does not have to demonstrate an exact match with taught programmes.

WBL Curriculum

Nevertheless, the university curriculum structures and processes in which the WBL programmes are framed are non-negotiable, and therefore the creation of a programme requires the claimant and his/her academic advisor to work together to meet the demands of each curriculum component. A model of the curriculum framework is seen in Figure 1.1 below. The RAL module of the WBL curriculum is the APEL component (using local MU terminology), which provides the starting point of the claimant's programme, and requires the claimant to plan the rest of the programme to argue the relationship and the cohesion between the different components, including the APEL themes of learning and their relevance to the overall award. APEL is used within undergraduate programmes in other HEIs, but rarely as flexibly as this, although some equivalents and comparisons may be made between MU's curriculum and other uses of APEL in subject specific and WBL programmes elsewhere. APEL may be used in other universities when particular learning activities which meet the required learning outcomes prescribed for their programme are identified, but there may be uncertainty about the amount of credit that the activities may generate. The development of criteria that guide credit volume may therefore contribute to these academic planning decisions regarding project size. This suggests another possible application to other undergraduate programmes.

The assessment of APEL requires a decision on both the volume of credit as well as the academic level. Currently, the WBL programmes use eleven level descriptors to determine the appropriate academic level. However, determining the volume of credit awarded for a claim has not received the same attention. This is an area where no publications have been found, probably due to the common practice in APEL assessment which matches the claimant's learning to formally stated modular outcomes. When matching specific subject content, the amount of credit to be awarded is not a problem, as matching experiential learning with formal taught learning outcomes is sufficient to meet credit volume requirements. The amount of credit in formal modules is calculated on the general notion in use of 1 credit equals 10 hours of scholarly endeavour (Walsh and Johnson, 2001), and reflects the amount of learning hours which the student is calculated to have spent learning a taught module by both taught and self-directed study.

Unfortunately, in experiential learning this time factor is not applicable, as some people could have spent ten years in the same job and not learnt anything new after the first year. Conversely, they may have extensive learning from, perhaps, five of the ten years. Calculating experiential learning in the same way as calculating the notional hours of formal study would therefore expect the learner to make a claim for a time period of up to five or ten years of learning. Obviously this is unfeasible and unworkable, as a true picture would include doing the same activity until a level of expertise has been achieved, or doing routine and regular tasks that have little learning value at HE level. Therefore, somewhere between the recognition of a little learning and ten years worth has to be calculated in a way that is fair to the claimant.

Figure 1.1: Work Based Learning Curriculum

(From Doncaster, 2000).

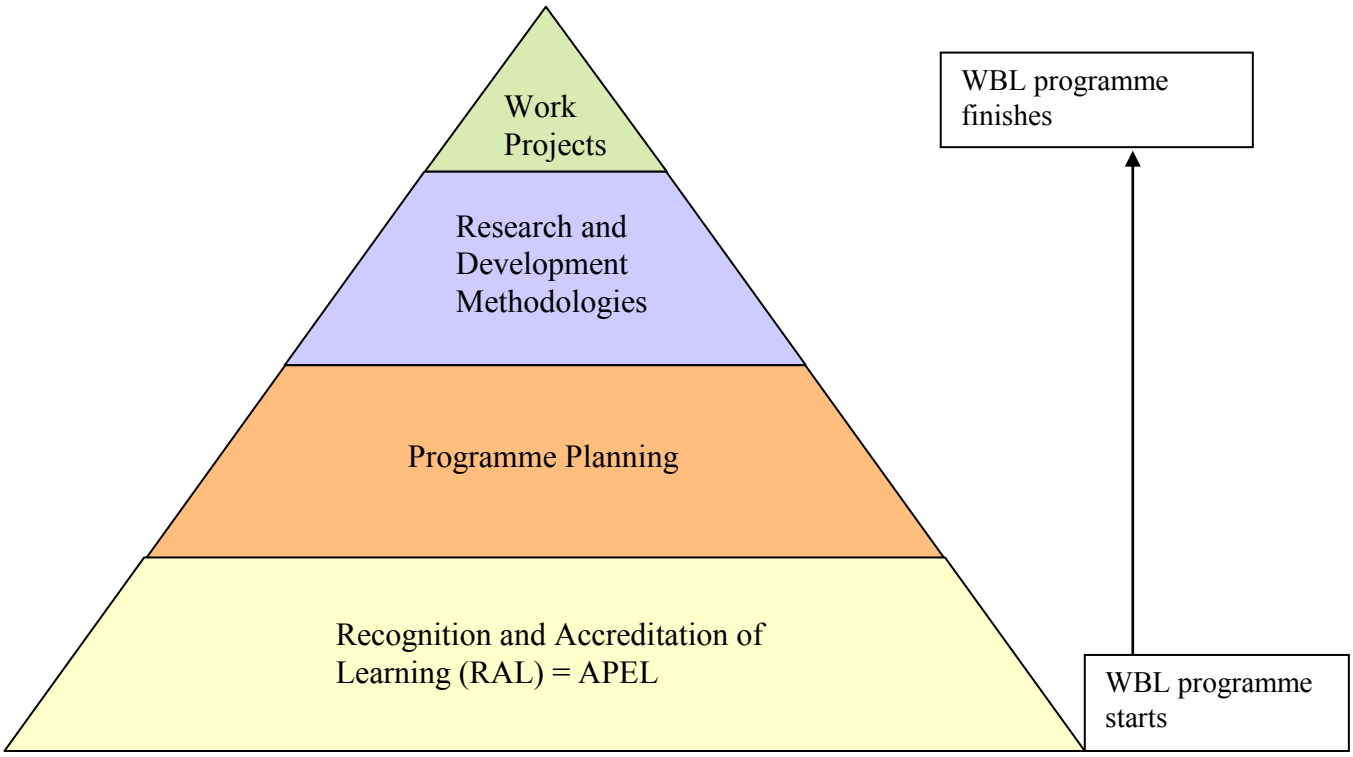


Figure 1.1 demonstrates the development of a WBL programme with the APEL module forming the base of the programme, and therefore forming the core of the claimant's learning.

Currently in WBL programmes, the claimant compiles the content and size of the claim, but the amount of credit that may be awarded is reliant primarily upon the

experience and assessment of the individual assessor and thus can be considered as intangible, inequitable and subjective. Experienced academics within the CEWBL have developed their own personal tacit methods of assessment and credit volume calculation which are not formalised. The development of guidance and criteria to facilitate assessment of credit volumes would be a valuable outcome of this project, encouraging standardisation of assessment, making it more transparent, and thereby rationalising the process for both claimant and assessor.

The Aims of the Project

Therefore, the aims of this project are to:

- Explore the teaching, learning and facilitation processes in the recognition and accreditation of WBL; to develop criteria for assessment of credit volume and subsequently contribute to the development of the knowledge, skills and practice of academic accreditation of learning within the university and across the wider national and international academic community.

Products and Outcomes

It is anticipated that the following would be specific outcomes:

Products:

1. This report verifying the effects of accreditation upon students within the WBL programme.
2. Criteria to assess credit volume that can be used by accreditation assessors to facilitate consistency of assessment and therefore improve the quality of the accreditation process. The criteria could also be used by claimants to improve their accreditation claims.
3. Guidance for practitioners in facilitating and assessing the RAL module and guidance for claimants.

Additional outcomes

4. Feedback into the WBL curriculum, contributing teaching and facilitation activities to improve future APEL teaching and learning strategies.
5. Dissemination of APEL facilitation and assessment knowledge and strategies to the wider national and international academic community.

Focus of the Project Report

This report will describe the project process and the compilation of the products. Chapter One has outlined the context and rationale for the project and identified the aim and expected products from the project. Chapter Two will identify and draw upon the key literature and research that has informed the project process, and summarise the objectives of the project. Chapter Three will discuss the research design and rationale for choosing an action research approach as compared to other research approaches, and provide a summary of the project plan of each stage of the project and the dependencies between each action research cycle, together with the expected achievements of each stage. A full summary of the project stages can be found in Table 3.3. Chapter Four discusses the project activity of each cycle of the action research project, together with the findings from each cycle, so providing continuity between the activity and the findings. Chapter Five discusses the implications of the key findings from each cycle, although this has had to be selective due to word limitations and the large amount of data that has been generated through the project process. Chapter Five concludes with reflections upon the role of the insider researcher/ practitioner and will reflect upon some of the personal key learning that has emerged from the project process. Chapter Six summarises the findings and recommendations for future practice.

Summary

This chapter has presented the rationale and context of this project and indicated several expected outcomes. The intention is to influence the internal university community by providing guidance and information for advising and assessing APEL claims. Criteria to assist in the assessment and compilation of APEL claims will be

developed, which will contribute to the knowledge and understanding of academic accreditation in the wider academic community, both nationally and internationally.

CHAPTER TWO

PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the relevant literature that has informed the development of the project and theoretical framework, particularly in terms of development of the research tools and the current understanding of APEL both in the UK and this particular approach taken from within MU. As part of an interpretative research approach (Robson, 2002), it is expected that additional literature will emerge during the research process as it develops, and which therefore may not yet be identified as relevant to this inquiry. The chapter concludes with an outline of the objectives of the project, with a brief rationale for the inclusion of each objective resulting in a summary of the project plan, linking the literature to the project processes.

Key Themes in the Literature

Literature relating to APEL, accreditation of prior (certificated) learning (APL), academic accreditation and experiential learning and WBL were explored in some breadth and depth to inform the creation of a questionnaire concerning the student experience and impact of undertaking an APEL claim, and to compile questions to ask academics about the facilitation and accreditation process. All the literature retrieved was categorised into research, discussion or commentary. Very little in-depth substantial research has been undertaken, although there are some national surveys (e.g. Merrifield *et al.*, 2000; Garnett *et al.*, 2004; Johnson, 2004).

Practical guidance as to how to do APEL is also available (e.g. Hull, 1992; Doncaster, 2000; Whittaker, 2000; Johnson, 2002; Wailey, 2002; QAA, 2004), all providing various pieces of advice in facilitating students to learn from experience. These can be referred to when creating teaching and learning materials to aid facilitation and dissemination of good practice of APEL. A noticeable deficit within the literature was the lack of information or discussion regarding the determination of credit volume within experiential learning claims, which is interesting as an aim of this project is to

identify criteria to assess credit volume. An initial assumption of this project is that HE programmes are designed around Credit Accumulation Transfer System (CATS) points, with the current accepted practice that 1 credit equals 10 hours of academic activity, whether that be direct student/teacher contact or self-directed study, and that the academic level of credit provides the educational currency between HEIs (Johnson and Walsh, 2000) indicating the level of difficulty. Components of credit volume, level of difficulty and transferability of credit from experience or a programme all contribute to the process of APEL. A definition of APEL is:

> "The accreditation of prior experiential learning, that is, the award of credit for learning based on prior experience — from work, community or volunteer experience — which has not previously been assessed and/or awarded credit. By converting informal learning into certificated learning, APEL provides cost-effective routes to qualifications. It has potential significance for people who, through life and work experience, have learned knowledge, skills and analytical abilities that are comparable to those in a higher education award. APEL offers the possibility for what learners know to be recognised, assessed with the same rigour as any other learning would be at HE level, and awarded credit" (Merrifield *et al.*, 2000:1).

This definition identifies APEL's position within HE as a way to recognise experiential learning at HE level, thereby giving it status within the academic community, and demonstrating that learning has currency beyond experience alone which can be recognised by HE as part of a programme of learning. Formal recognition of informal learning by using specific assessment criteria (Prince, 2004) indicates that accreditation measures outputs rather than inputs. Recognising learning by output or outcome is not always acknowledged in traditional academic programmes, where the indicative content and skills to be mastered relies more on the syllabus of what is perceived as important by the elite academic community rather than knowledge which may be actually learnt by the student. Formal assessment strategies often require the regurgitation of facts and information by the student through the formal HE assessment processes, as in exams or coursework. Conversely, APEL ranges across a wide diversification of knowledge content, skills, processes and outcomes as learnt by the student through a variety of mediums, sometimes referred to, and including, the 'university of life'. By stating that accreditation recognises knowledge, skills and analysis comparable to HE, it also indicates that there are quality assurance measures inherent within accreditation in order to assure its comparability to traditional assessed

HE knowledge. These quality measures confirm APEL's comparability with taught programmes when using APEL within an HE curriculum.

Garnett *et al.* (2004:4) define APEL as:

> "…a process by which appropriate experiential and uncertificated learning is given recognition and an academic value. Often the academic value is expressed in terms of academic credit points (a measure of volume) at a particular level (a measure of difficulty) but it can occur outside an academic credit framework for exemption from specific course units. Experiential learning encompasses knowledge, skills and behaviours acquired in a planned or unplanned way through life, especially work. APEL is often closely associated with and sometimes subsumed within APL, which is Accreditation of Prior Learning and can apply to both certificated and uncertificated learning".

This definition of APEL focuses more upon the processes of learning, whether planned or unplanned, or outside an academic framework, rather than the status of APEL within HE. It does, however, recognise the importance of credit volume and level, which is particularly pertinent to this project which focused on measuring volumes of credit.

APEL, Experiential Learning and WBL

There is a vast literature related to experiential learning and WBL, so consequently there is very little room for a full exploration here. There is much commentary and debate, but little substantial research. In MU, Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning has been used to guide the development of the WBL curriculum (see Figure 2.1). Kolb (1984) argues for a holistic integrative learning perspective which combines experience with perception, behaviour and cognitive skills, based on three models of experiential learning which initiate from Lewin, Dewey and Piaget (Kolb, 1984, cited in Jarvis and Griffin, 2003). From these learning models he suggests that:

> "…learning is not fixed and immutable elements… but are formed and reformed through experience……[it is] a process whereby concepts are derived from and continuously monitored by experience (Kolb, 1984, cited in Jarvis and Griffin, 2003:165).

Kolb argues that learning is a process not a product, but that all new learning is relearning which is adapted in the light of new knowledge and/or experience. Experiential learning can be described as informal learning, in that it cannot be 'taught' in a classroom.

Eraut (2001) calls this 'non-formal learning' and considers that the timing of the learning event within the learning process leads to implicit learning; that is, when knowledge is gained outside a conscious effort to learn and without an explicit knowledge of what was learned (Eraut, 2001). He argues that the outcome of implicit learning is 'tacit knowledge' and that it can come to the fore in practice experience when a situation requires rapid action or complex responses that an individual cannot analyse or immediately explain. He also cites Polyani (1967) as defining tacit knowledge as "that which we know but cannot tell", and suggests that to make tacit knowledge explicit it must be uncovered either by the knower, or by a researcher who then seeks verification by the individual. Jarvis (1999) argues that tacit knowledge is learned from experience, either unconsciously or consciously, and that the actual learning experience may have been forgotten or repressed, which supports Eraut's concept of implicit learning. Jarvis suggests that this is because tacit knowledge is a pragmatic response which only emerges when needed, used within a practical situation as practical knowledge, and therefore available as "taken-for-granted knowledge that we cannot articulate…" (Jarvis, 1999:48). He suggests that tacit knowledge particularly contributes to professional knowledge, and is built up through an autobiographical process where we know it but may not be able to articulate the "how, when, that, what and why" (Jarvis, 1999:48) of applied knowledge in practice. These ideas are relevant to this project in two ways: the process of APEL enables learners to make explicit their learning from experience, as the 'knower' of that knowledge, which may be semi-professional in origin, or may be learnt in a professional environment such as in education, health care or engineering. Additionally, this project will ask academics to tell of their tacit knowledge about the facilitation and assessment of APEL, and in so doing make their experienced and informal tacit knowledge explicit for others to access and use.

The field of WBL has done much to challenge traditional discipline-based assumptions associated with APEL practice (Armsby *et al*., 2006), not least in recognising that

university level learning can occur outside the university, thus challenging the traditional view that knowledge is only generated from research within HE. Indeed, reflection upon the ways in which some practical knowledge has been generated from practice, such as in the health disciplines (which is my own field of professional practice), which is formalised in academia through research processes, shows that knowledge is often generated from practice or work in the first instance, and it is only when a job becomes professionalised that it becomes absorbed into an HE syllabus to be researched and inculcated into new recruits to the profession by transferring the philosophy of practice and knowledge of long-standing experienced practitioners (Greenwood, 1966). The reluctance to accept WBL by academics seems to reflect academic protectionism that arises where academics hold onto the keys of ownership of knowledge and consequent power (Konrad, 2001; Thomson, 2003; Armsby *et al*., 2006) over those outside academia. This defensiveness probably arises due a perceived threat to traditional discipline values and positivism in subject discipline knowledge which informs professional practice. Consequently, it may be considered that practice knowledge alone is insufficient to advance a profession's body of expert knowledge, requiring theory and research to be present.

However, recognition of learning from the workplace through formal accreditation can contribute to the growth of new and emerging professions (Fillery-Travis and Lane, in press), as well as the government's lifelong learning agenda, and can respond rapidly to changes in the labour market (Konrad, 2001). Recognition of the type of knowledge generated from work reflects the concepts of mode 1 and mode 2 knowledge (Gibbons *et al*., 1994), where mode 1 is subject based, linear, cumulative and scientific and is traditionally taught and created within HE as subject disciplines, and mode 2 is multi-variant, unsystematic, transdisciplinary and creative, and found outside the university (Brennan and Little, 1996), generated from work, emerging from practice and represented in WBL.

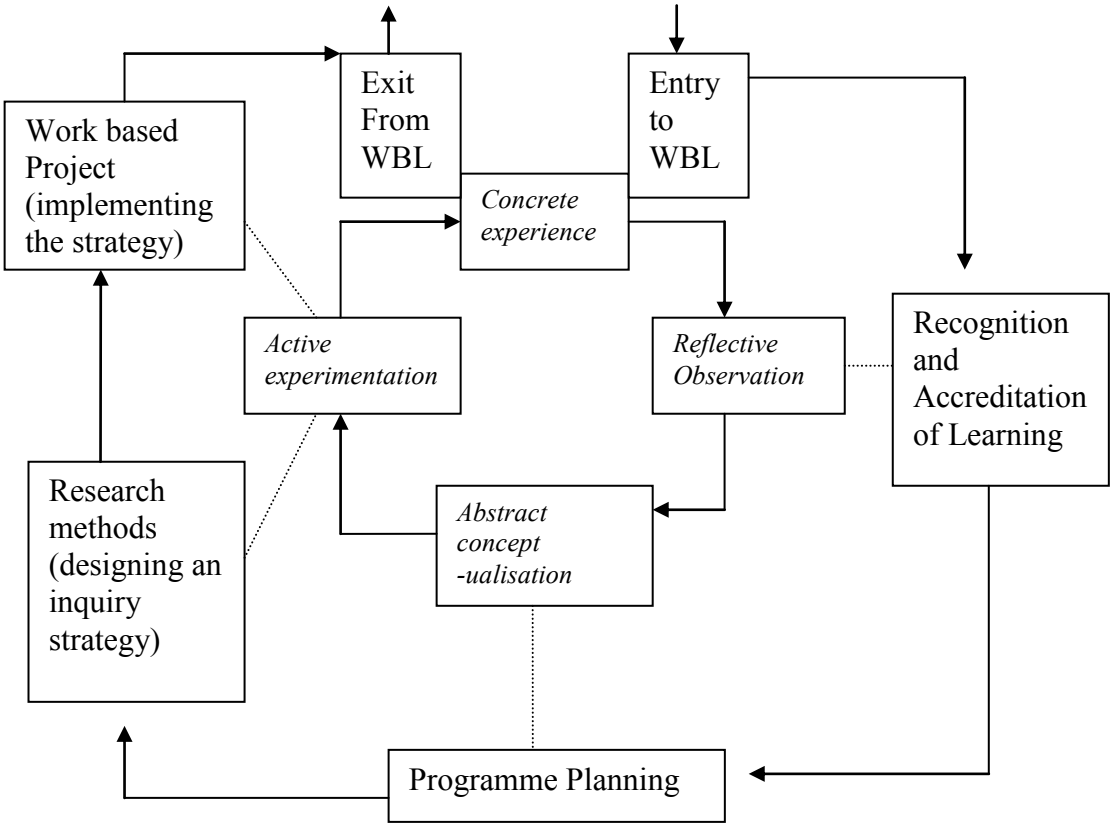
The use of Kolb's (1984) learning cycle to facilitate learning has been used within the MU WBL curriculum (Figure 2.1) to facilitate identification of knowledge from work (Doncaster, 2000). Kolb defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984:41) and this is linked to the MU accreditation module (RAL) specifically by asking claimants to reflect upon their concrete experiences as the first stage in an experiential learning cycle. The selection of

learning experiences from which to make a RAL (APEL) claim then takes the claimant through a process of 'active experimentation', where experiential learning is tested out against the level criteria for the award of academic credit (Doncaster, 2000), and claimants make their tacit knowledge explicit to be accredited.

Having recognised experiential learning from work, it can then be built upon and complemented by additional relevant academic studies. Gregory (1994:41) argues this as being "the capacity for competent reflective practice… where knowledge acquisition provides a framework of understanding around which reflection can build on workplace reality", requiring the provision of a flexible curriculum to enable WBL to be articulated within relevant programmes and recognise professional development. This capacity has been incorporated into the MU WBL curriculum.

Reflecting on workplace activity is seen as crucial to the development of a successful RAL claim, as the process of making tacit learning explicit requires critical reflection as a process of the claim. Evans (1994) describes the process of APEL as systematic reflection leading to identification of significant learning, which leads to a synthesis of evidence to support claims for accreditation. The reflective process can make a powerful impact upon an individual, resulting in change of mindset about one's self, by recognising personal achievements. This is a theme to be explored in the student questionnaire. Structured reflection upon experience has the potential to unlock an individual's knowledge and capabilities in a way that conventional education is unlikely to achieve, resulting in both personal and professional development (Evans, 1994).

Figure 2.1: Kolb's (1984) Learning Cycle as Overlaid Upon the WBL Curriculum Framework



Source: Doncaster (2000).

Key: Inner boxes represent Kolb's experiential learning cycle
Outer boxes represent WBL studies core modules
Lines between Kolb's cycle and specific core modules shown by broken lines

Reflective Learning

The notion of being changed by reflective learning and generating knowledge from reflection relates to Warner Weil and McGill's (1989) identification of four villages that categorise modes of experiential learning; the fourth being concerned with personal growth and development through experiential learning approaches that increase self-awareness and group effectiveness. The underlying assumption recognises and understands that cognitive, perceptual, affective and behavioural attributes within a group or work situation will result in personal development and change. It is anticipated that critical reflection will lead to an increase in self-awareness and personal effectiveness, resulting in greater personal autonomy and choice which Mezirow (1991) terms 'transformative learning'. The crux of critical reflection upon

experience enables the individual to make sense of and interpret it, having identified the personal, professional and social assumptions that underpin decisions and actions which consequently influence learning. Whilst transformative learning is not the current express purpose of RAL, personal change and development may emerge from an educational programme *per se*, and additional insights and perspectives may contribute to the learning experience as serendipity of effective education. If the claimant has learnt to interrogate and critique their professional practice and reflect upon it in a way that uncovers their assumptions and reveals new insights, then the process of RAL could become transformative, but it cannot be guaranteed to occur for every RAL claimant. The opportunity to facilitate individuals through critical reflection can be a significant experience for both the learner and facilitator, but is not without potential difficulties for both parties (Hull, 1992). Noted difficulties can range from managing the academic language (Peters, 2004), emotions from revisiting old memories related to key learning experiences such as redundancy, divorce or bereavement and in discovering self-awareness (Heron, 1992), or the facilitator being unprepared for or unable to handle sensitive issues stimulated by reflection (Hull, 1992).

WBL

Accreditation, as used within WBL programmes at MU, allows individuals to create their own programme, based on their claims for experiential learning from work. In terms of practical facilitation of the RAL module, the current accreditation requirements for assessment of RAL are clearly laid out in resource packs for the student, but require the student to refer to two other university resource packs: the subject handbook and reflections handbook. If claimants are unaccustomed to reading academic information, this can seem complicated and bewildering, especially for undergraduates. A simplification of the accreditation and assessment processes and clarification of the expectations of the university in terms of what the assessors are looking for and how to go about it would enhance the quality of the claimant's learning experience. Additionally, the need to introduce academic terminology at an early stage within the WBL programme, and provide easily understandable learning materials, would be of benefit to the WBL claimants, many of whom do not have a traditional academic entry to the programme and therefore are limited in their academic experiences and skills.

However, there are issues in relation to the use of APEL within WBL programmes across the HE sector. The extent to which WBL is regarded as being equal to traditional HE is still being debated within HE, in spite of government drives to increase the use of foundation degrees to improve the skills of the UK workforce. A main contention in the debate is the assessment and accreditation of learning (Nixon *et al*., 2006). Connor (2005) argues that accreditation and assessment of WBL needs to be in a form that employers can recognise and embrace, so that employees can build up credit over time and move between levels. This would also contribute to the government's agenda of widening participation in HE by recognising learning associated with, but not situated within, HE. Nixon *et al.* (2006), in their study for the Higher Education Academy, question whether a credit-based system can be developed to assess learning at HE levels which can also resolve anomalies between institutions regarding the amount of accredited learning transferred into a programme. Currently, this varies between HEIs and seems to be arbitrary, limiting the transferability of experiential learning between HEIs. Effective assessment of credit volumes could, therefore, contribute to the development of a more robust accreditation scheme.

Student Experience of APEL

Doncaster (2000) summarises the benefits of doing APEL through the RAL module for students on the MU programme. Students can negotiate a highly customised programme based upon their initial RAL claim, which is career orientated and projects into their future aspirations. Undertaking a RAL claim develops critical reflection and analysis skills (Evans, 1994; Merrifield *et al*., 2000), which are usefully developed for the rest of the programme and future work. Drawing on their own work makes study highly relevant, therefore increasing motivation. The award of credit builds self-confidence and accentuates the value of experiential learning (Hamill and Sutherland, 1994), and this in turn reduces the fear of failure in an HE programme, which a number of students may have due to their untraditional entry route into university (Peters, 2004). Some of Doncaster's observations are anecdotal, unsupported by objective evidence, but a small internal study evaluating the Masters WBL programme confirmed that the RAL module was highly valued in terms of recognising learning that could not be acknowledged through any other route, and that the development of an RAL claim was perceived to be a really useful experience by 87% (n = 70) of the participants in

that study (Hawkes, 2002). Anecdotal evidence from WBL students at all levels supports this, but evaluation of the RAL component alone has not been fully explored, suggesting that an evaluation of the student experience is overdue, to which this project will contribute.

Student experiences have been documented from the academic's perspective within procedural or developmental writings (e.g. Gregory, 1994; Trowler, 1996; Harvey, 2004), and postgraduate experience has featured more than undergraduate. The ability of APEL to boost learners' self-confidence, to empower them (Gregory, 1994) and to increase their motivation is noted by Evans (1994), Merrifield *et al.* (2000) and Peters (2004). Peters (2004) undertook a qualitative study of a small group of undergraduate students undertaking an APEL module as a way to access their chosen academic programme within an HEI. The students' experience was generally positive, although not all were awarded credit for their portfolios, but they saw APEL as facilitating their progress on the academic programme of their choice, so recognising their value as professionals and individuals with lived experience. A major barrier encountered was learning the academic jargon, as they had to master the language of academia in order to succeed and to make a claim that was acceptable to the subject-based assessors, which Peters called 'cracking the code'. It has also been observed by Trowler (1996) and Warner Weil and McGill (1989) that students who access HE through such non-traditional routes (such as APEL) may not have the academic skills and language readily available to communicate in the accepted 'academic' terminologies, thus finding themselves at a distinct disadvantage when trying to integrate into the education system as they did not always comprehend what was being asked of them.

Merrifield *et al.* (2000) undertook ten case studies within a survey of APEL use and uptake within HEIs, and reported that APEL had a positive impact upon widening participation and access routes for students with a non-traditional academic background entering HE, or as an entry route for refugees wishing to enter HE but who lacked the necessary evidence to support the usual entry routes. They reported that students found APEL difficult because the skills of critical reflection and analysis were hard to apply to their own learning, and staff found these hard to facilitate. Undertaking APEL could be psychologically difficult, partly due to isolation from others when compiling a claim, as they missed the opportunity to learn together as a group. The length of personal study time required was longer than anticipated and meeting academic

requirements was challenging. APEL was perceived as being time consuming; both to facilitate and to assess. A therapeutic benefit of undertaking APEL came from reflecting upon negative experiences, as it provided the opportunity to explore key learning experiences, such as redundancy or divorce, although revisiting previous experience had the potential to be painful and therefore emotionally costly, but cathartic (Heron, 1992). These issues require certain skills of the academics facilitating the students' learning, and they too may be challenged as they vacillate between roles of academic and counsellor (Hull, 1992). This project will explore some of these factors affecting student experience.

Other factors related to APEL include issues related to funding and costs of student recruitment, retention and facilitation (Merrifield *et al*., 2000; Thomson, 2003). The bureaucracy, academic cultures and jargon associated with APEL are perceived to present unnecessary hindrances to claimants and academics themselves (Eraut, 1994; Whittaker, 2000; Thomson, 2003; Garnett *et al*., 2004; Peters, 2004), together with concerns about quality assurance of assessment and learning capabilities (e.g. Thomson, 2003; Fitch, 2004; Harvey, 2004). APEL seems to appeal to a minority of academics and students, and while some of this may be due to limited marketing and lack of knowledge (Merrifield *et al*., 2000; Garnett *et al*., 2004), it would seem that there is a need to further demonstrate the value, potential and purpose of APEL to all possible users of the process, whether they are academics, claimants or other stakeholders, such as employers, as well as demystifying the teaching, learning and assessment processes associated with APEL.

The WBL Curriculum

The term 'curriculum' is moderately old fashioned and is rarely used in current practice, particularly in HE (Jarvis, 2004). However, Boud and Solomon (2001) note that the term 'curriculum' now offers a broader interpretation of what is required in a WBL course, because it does not offer a preset syllabus or content, but considers the educational processes, the context of learning and developmental stages that are anticipated to be completed as the academic programme progresses. Stenhouse (1975) advises that a curriculum should offer a basis for planning a course, the justification for it and the means for studying it empirically. He advocates the concept of the teacher as researcher within the classroom, and while this was in relation to schools rather than

HE, it is a sound principle that the teacher should research their own practice in order that practice may be improved and developed, and is advocated by more recent action researchers such as McNiff and Whitehead (2002). In my role as worker/researcher within this project, the notion of researching aspects of the curriculum as part of my teaching role is acknowledged and integrated into this project, and explored further in later chapters.

As the root of APEL lies in experience, it would seem appropriate to adopt a curriculum framework that considers the worker/learner and their experience as central to the process of learning. Brennan and Little (1996) have identified four types of curriculum framework for WBL, of which the latter two types 'C' and 'D' are particularly relevant to the type of claimants at MU. Type 'C' is "curriculum framework controlled by higher education institution, content designed with employer, learner primarily full-time employee" (Brennan and Little, 1996:73), indicating the use of accredited training provided by the employer, or recognition of specific competencies required as part of the WBL programme. Type 'D' is a "curriculum framework controlled by higher education institution, focus and content determined primarily by learner who is based primarily in employment" (Brennan and Little, 1996:76). Brennan and Little consider that type 'D' is the purest form of WBL, as the learner identifies their own personal learning needs dependant upon their job role and position within the organisation, but both types fit my experience of WBL programmes. Essentially, the core of the WBL curriculum is the individual's learning arising from, in and through work. The learner therefore has a leading role in determining the content of their personalised curriculum, and the university provides the framework for educational and professional development, working collaboratively with the learner and their employer.

WBL as a Field of Study

The notion of WBL as a 'field' of study (Portwood, 2000) has a particular focus on the knowledge that is generated from work, both from the perspective of the practitioner and from the context of the workplace. The intention of the WBL programme is to enable the individual learner to acquire the appropriate knowledge and abilities to improve their practice within their community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and make them more effective practitioners (Costley, 2000). Knowledge gained in,

through and for work is usually transdisciplinary and multidimensional knowledge that is not easily extracted into subject disciplines (Garnett *et al*., 2004), i.e. mode 2 knowledge (Gibbons *et al*., 1994), and therefore the curriculum must capture these interrelated layers of learning from work and integrate them with new knowledge at HE level.

The use of andragogical learning theory (Knowles *et al*., 2005), where the learner's experience is central and valued, and the motivation stems from the learner's own need to know, can be a powerful way of designing a programme, and can use APEL to great effect. Whilst individuals may be motivated by their need to learn for work, there are usually some pedagogical requirements which need to be integrated into the work based curriculum, as learners do not always know what they do not know, and therefore they will need to be introduced to some new concepts and ideas that initially they may not see as relevant, unless presented in accordance with andragogical principles, which motivate the adult learner. However, work remains the content and focus of the curriculum for the learner, because the learning and skills developed for and by the workplace will not necessarily fit neatly into the subject discipline and professional structures of academia (Boud *et al*., 2001). Boud *et al*. (2001:48) summarise the educational implications of work as the curriculum as:

- recognising the context and position of the learner in the workplace, and the consequent demands upon the worker learner;
- recognising a wide range of different cultures co-existing within the context of learning;
- providing a flexible programme to respond to changes in the worker, the workplace and the academy;
- recognising the nature of multi-disciplinary learning that means knowledge will be contested as there is rarely an authoritative source, and therefore ways of recognising knowledge from the workplace must be constructed to allow for knowledge from other sources to be legitimised;
- learning must be centred upon the learner and what they need to learn, rather than what might be available for them to learn.

These would appear to be congruent with the concept of curriculum as a process whereby the interaction of the learner with new knowledge from work and academia

are facilitated by both work based colleagues and academic facilitators (Smith, 2000) within a particular context. A curriculum process model looks to the world of experimentation, again reflecting Kolb's (1984) learning cycle where active experimentation is encouraged as part of the learning process. This is facilitated in the next step of the WBL curriculum design (see Figure 2.1) following the APEL component. Smith (2000) quotes Stenhouse (1975) that this phase of experimentation invites critical testing rather than just acceptance. Unlike curriculum product models, there are no tight behavioural objectives, but the attention shifts from a product to a process model, reflecting the university's policy of developing autonomous lifelong learners (Learning and Teaching Quality, 2002), and the NCWBLP approach of facilitating learning rather than teaching specific knowledge (Osbourne *et al*., 1998).

Harris (2000) reviews some traditional teaching approaches applied to APEL and notes that the context of learning, other than environmental input, has not previously been seen as relevant to the learning. Rather, it was considered to be the cognitive activities and behavioural outcomes that influence learning. She suggests that social constructivism theory has a contribution to make to APEL as it offers "a situated approach [which] focuses explicitly on the varied contexts in which learning processes occur" (Harris, 2000:5), in which knowledge and interaction are situated and inseparable from the world in which they occur. She cites Lave and Wenger (1991), who identify that learning through participation in a work group, such as an apprenticeship scheme, is empowering learning leading ultimately to the generation and transformation of social practices within that community. She extracts some of the teaching and learning characteristics in such a context and identifies that social learning where individual performance and group relationships are in the forefront, together with knowledge of the immediate context, relevant people and the broader societal setting, are key to the learning. However, these factors cannot be taught as the learning from this context may be unintentional, and are often implicit through role modelling, thus being acquired through belonging to that community.

This resonates closely with my experience of work contexts that WBL learners find themselves in when preparing a RAL claim, as every work context is different, although there may be some similarities between professions. Consequently, a prescribed curriculum is not possible, nor can assessment be comparable between participants in relation to content, as every learner's experience, even within the same

organisation, will also be mediated through the learner themselves as well as their workplace. Harris (2000) places APEL within a psychological constructivist approach, whereby learners construct their own meanings from reflection upon work experiences, and where learning becomes situated, informal and closely related to the context. The implication for APEL is that the context is highly influential upon the learning process, possibly even inhibiting the transfer of knowledge from one context to another. Consequently, APEL claimants should be made aware of these influences and develop their understanding of learning from peers, colleagues, context, networks and organisational structures.

Models of APEL

The four villages of experiential learning, as categorised by Warner Weil and McGill (1989), emphasise different purposes and practices for experiential learning and are used to outline the differences in key assumptions, influences and challenges in each mode. To summarise, village one: the assessment and accreditation of prior experiential learning; village two: experiential learning and change in post-school education and training; village three: experiential learning and social change; and village four: personal growth and development. Of these four typologies, the key ones are those of village one, which reflects the debate concerning the recognition of experiential learning as seen as valid and reliable by academics, employers, professional and training bodies, and village four, which argues that "experiential learning becomes the basis for cognitive, perceptual, affective and behavioural learning, and for exploring ways in which these can be integrated in the work situation and beyond" (Warner Weil and McGill, 1989:17). All of these are concerned with change of one sort or another.

Butterworth (1992) places APEL within either a credit exchange or developmental model. The credit exchange model is the award of specific credit for informal learning where it demonstrates that learning can match specific learning outcomes on a validated programme, and as such is based on 'outcomes'. APEL generally seeks to demonstrate 'outputs' as measured against assessment criteria (Prince, 2004). A typical example would be the use of APEL in NVQ programmes which enable claimants to complete vocational training by obtaining recognition of their skills that link closely to the commercial and industrial needs of their employers (Bjornavold, 2000; Konrad, 2001). This model may also be termed a 'deficit model', as it implies that the

knowledge presented by the individual is only sufficient to be incorporated within a validated programme, and that there is a 'deficit' in the claimant's knowledge which can only be made up with codified academic knowledge from an educational institution.

Matching specific learning outcomes within a prescribed programme means that credit volumes are awarded against a specific module or programme, and the assessor does not have to determine the amount of credit that is represented within a claim, unless it is a greater quantity than permitted by the university. Bailie (2000) offers a six point typology of APEL arising from an audit of APEL policies across the UK and Ireland, recognising APEL for social vision, access, diagnosis, assessment, accreditation and awards. The delineations between these categories are blurred, as each type could easily merge into another in practice. Each category includes the element of reflective learning to enable the individual to become aware of the value of their learning, and Bailie and O'Hagan (1998: 52) suggest that the "development of the individual focuses on the existential model of self under creation", thus suggesting that outcomes of APEL are synergistic; demonstrating an individual's professional learning. Bailie considers that the credit exchange model offers the claimant the opportunity to match specific outcomes, often towards certificated learning such as NVQs, or to match modules as in the deficit model. Identifying the claimant's learning and experience may meet relevant learning outcomes, but may not be at all pertinent to the intended programme, as focusing on specific learning outcomes and making the learning and experience fit may also short change the claimant, by not recognising all their available learning. This approach may have implications and limitations for students using APEL in other universities who are looking for access or advanced standing against their chosen programmes of study.

Butterworth's (1992) developmental model expects the individual to reflect upon their knowledge and abilities gained through experience and formulate them into codified propositional knowledge, which is then accredited either for admission or advanced standing against an academic programme (Trowler, 1996), and is a common approach of APEL. The use of a learning cycle (such as Kolb, 1984) or reflective cycle (such as Boud *et al*., 1985), may facilitate the process of liberating and articulating new learning from the experience. The amount of credit awarded will still depend on the amount of expressed codified knowledge. The use of systematic reflection leading to the

identification of significant learning is advocated by Warner Weil and McGill (1989), who identify APEL as being in their first 'village' of experiential learning, which is concerned primarily with assessment and accreditation of experience from life and work, specifically to create a route into HE, employment, training or professions. The developmental model, therefore, seeks to enable the individual to undergo significant personal development, based on reflection and interpretation of experience, which then becomes a resource for learning, and generating 'general' credit (Bailie, 2000). The acknowledgement of that credit within an HE programme may become a problem, as general credit does not link into specific learning outcomes of particular programmes, but the full value of an APEL claim may not be possible to acknowledge and reward as it may not fit within a designated programme of study. The award of general credit may entail development of individually negotiated learning programmes and, as Bailie suggests, this may be used at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, particularly for professional programmes. This developmental typology is used extensively within MU programmes as a starting point for individually negotiated WBL programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Garnet, 1998), but the knowledge is not codified to reflect a subject discipline.

Bailie's (2000) APEL for awards is for WBL that is past, present or planned experiential learning with a view to gain a specific existing award that may be acquired with minimal formal taught components. Learning may be completely experiential, and may meet the needs of employers or a specific industry where the programme has been customised for use in the workplace, but uses the university structure, assessment and control. However, in the UK this typology has not yet gone as far as the French model, which has enabled whole awards to be gained through APEL (Barkatoolah, 2000). The notion of awarding accreditation for learning completely achieved through work is also suggested by Lester (2006) as recognition of work undertaken as part of a professional practice award. The WBL programme at MU could include accreditation of an even greater proportion of a programme, to enable claimants to complete an award purely through APEL. There are some moves towards that at the higher end of WBL in the concept of the Doctorate in Public Works (Armsby and Workman, 2007), but this has not yet entered the wider debate in relation to the undergraduate WBL programme. Making allowances for recognition of experiential learning, both prior and future experiential learning is more likely to be seen in the UK as either negotiating a learning contract as part of making an experiential learning claim or, as in MU, as part of

planning a programme after the APEL assessment, which identifies future learning through work based projects.

Combining past and future learning has been suggested by Wailey and Simpson (2000), who combine the assessment of APEL with the diagnosis of learning needs in order to assist students in constructing personal critical frameworks and diagnosing personal learning needs on a programme, contributing to the transferable skills which are expected of a graduate. To be truly student-focused learning, this does require the locus of control of knowledge to be focused on the contribution the individual brings, rather than on the subject discipline requirements. However, taking the locus of knowledge (and therefore the power) away from the academy, and focusing exclusively on the individual's learning, is likely to make some academics view APEL with suspicion, as despite rigorous assessment and proof of equivalence there is concern that academic standards and conventions may not yet be met (Johnson, 2004). Bailie (2000) comments that no single system or model can do justice to the use of APEL within HE, and suggests that an inclusive model might be more appropriate, particularly if the four villages of experiential learning as described by Warner Weil and McGill (1989) are taken into consideration.

A question remains; who decides what types of experiential learning are valid or not? By recognising only a proportion of experiential learning put forward for accreditation (as in the credit deficit model), or trying to codify learning (as in the developmental model), the claimant may be short changed, and the experiential learning significant to the individual making the claim may be rejected by HEI, thus devaluing significant personal and professional learning.

Levels and Volumes of Credit

Where APEL is used to match specified learning outcomes, the problem of determining levels and amounts of credit does not arise. The standard method of calculating credit volume is related to notional hours of study or equivalence to a standard validated module (Johnson, 2004), and level of credit relates entirely to module or programme outcomes, or the use of level descriptors (SEEC, 2003). There is no discussion in the literature as to how these practical problems of assessment might be addressed, other than by level descriptors. MU has devised eleven level descriptors which, when

extrapolated at each academic level from certificate level to Masters, provide a clear reference for assessing academic level. However, in practice, there are no similar descriptors for formally assessing credit volume and currently the assessment of credit volume is arbitrary, subjective and inconsistent, both within MU and other HEIs. This indicates that criteria for credit volume are overdue and need to be devised to validate current practice.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that assessing volume of credit is problematic for HEIs which include learning agreements as part of APEL or WBL programme (Ramsey, 2006, personal communication). An estimate of the value of general credit is made for the student to work towards as part of the APEL claim (University of Portsmouth, 2006; Walsh, 2006). In the one explicit volume of credit guidelines I have found from the University of Portsmouth (2006), the amount of credit was restricted to 10 undergraduate or 15 postgraduate credits (see Table 2.1) and relied on the student to identify the size of the claim, although guided by academics, but this restricted the potential credits of a claim.

These categories, whilst helpful, are not consistent and do not, for instance, consider the differences between a marketing plan for large amounts of corporate finances as opposed to that for self-employed or small businesses, nor does it quantify the amount of learning. Working on a work based project will depend on the individual's role and experience, and the size of the project may vary considerably between individual claimants. Attendance on a training programme does not guarantee the amount and depth of learning acquired from the process and so whilst the hours of learning may suggest a tariff of credits, the level then needs to be ascertained. Therefore, these tariffs are a move in the right direction, but currently lack precision.

Table 2.1: Credit Guidelines from the University of Portsmouth

10 credits (undergraduate) or 15 credits (postgraduate) for learning outcomes involving either:
• understanding a theoretical area, the associated principles and knowing how to apply them in practical situations
• understanding the theory and application of five or six methods of analysis
• an extended business plan
• a marketing review
• a developed quality procedure
• an extensive policy document
• evaluative research on a product with recommendations for future development
• project management and running a practical project
• understanding a range of management or administrative techniques
OR
10 credits (undergraduate) or 15 credits (postgraduate) earned as an outcome of 100 hours or 2½ weeks of WBL involving:
• a work based project
• a training course or number of associated courses.

Source: University of Portsmouth (2006).

Student claims are facilitated by CATS, which allow general credits to be included within an overall award. General credit is rarely graded, and so may not be used towards the assessment of the final degree classification (Johnson, 2004). The use of the academic framework to structure and recognise the learning provides a standard to demonstrate that academic requirements are met and, by using identified criteria to judge the learning against, quality assurance standards can be maintained (Walsh, 2006). The use of level descriptors at MU allows general credit to be incorporated within the academic framework at specific academic levels, and also demonstrates the validity of the claim for experiential learning as well as demonstrating learning achievement by identifying common characteristics between experiential and academic learning (Walsh, 2006). However, not having specific criteria for credit volumes means that the process of quality control is currently less rigorous. Academic guidance within

MU for developing new modules tends to rely on the sort of learning outcomes to be achieved or the notional hours of study, but the application of these vary between schools and disciplines within MU, and there is no consistent formula. At sub-degree level, accrediting organisations (BTEC for example) calculate the amount of learning hours in relation to the number of learning outcomes and require, for example, four learning outcomes for 30 hours of study (BTEC, 2004), but this has not translated into the HE CATS scheme, although this may change with the new Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) framework currently being revised (QCA, 2007).

Organisational Accreditation

Organisational accreditation is the recognition of learning outside university programmes and includes training provided by organisations and industries outside HE as having value and currency recognisable within HE. Financially, it is more cost effective for an organisation to have their in-house training accredited by an HEI and then used as part of an APEL claim towards a university award, as their employees are able to use learning relevant to work within an academic framework. Experience indicates that it is rare to find an HEI that will work in partnership with organisations to accredit programmes that primarily meet organisational requirements, rather than an HE agenda (Rounce and Workman, 2005). Organisational accreditation of training and development programmes offers academic progression for some employees, and consequently opens a potential student market, accessing new funding streams for the university. Accredited learning is particularly beneficial for WBL programmes, because it is closely related to identified organisational and employee needs. The process of accrediting training involves calculating credit volume, which is usually done in relation to the notional study hours of 1 credit per 10 hours. When calculating this, the time spent in the workplace, learning whilst working, is incorporated into the accreditation process and recognises the practice elements of learning. It also includes an assessment and specific outcomes that the learner should achieve as training outcomes. While this could offer a model upon which to base assessment of credit volume, working in reverse from the stated achievements, it remains arbitrary and subjective.

Objectives of this Project

Having identified several key themes in the literature around accreditation of experiential learning, WBL and its curriculum framework, reflective learning, models and practices of APEL, assessment of credit volumes and organisational accreditation, it is appropriate to draw it together into the objectives and rationale of this project. The objectives to achieve my aims will be to:

1. **Undertake a literature search and extensive reading around APEL.**

   Relevant literature will be consulted to guide the development of the research tools, such as questions for claimants and staff.

2. **Investigate undergraduate WBL students' experiences when compiling a RAL claim.**

   An initial evaluation will be undertaken to determine the current students' experience of the RAL module, within the WBL programme.

3. **Explore the impact of accreditation upon students' work and study programme.**

   Data provided by the students will be analysed as part of the RAL experience. As part of the research process, it will give insights into the students' perceived benefits of RAL in relation to their work.

4. **Explore the skills and techniques used by facilitators and assessors of the RAL module.**

   Collective 'tacit' knowledge (Jarvis, 1999) about teaching and assessing the RAL module will be collected and the information gained will contribute to the development of guidance for claimants and academics. This will also have a wider application to APEL activities outside the CEWBL and MU.

5. **Create teaching and learning resources to support facilitators of the RAL module.**

   Data from academics and claimants will provide insight into the facilitation process, and learning can be shared amongst the team to develop teaching and assessment.

6. **Develop criteria for assessing general credit volume in RAL claims.**

There are currently no guidelines for assessing credit volume in a RAL claim. MU's WBL programme does not match experiential learning against other programmes or modules for access or exemption. Development of assessment criteria to facilitate academic judgement when assessing APEL would enable the assessment process to become more transparent and equitable.

7. **Introduce the teaching and learning resources and assessment criteria for RAL into current practice within WBL programmes.**

As part of my role in the CEWBL, I disseminate aspects of the WBL curriculum to other schools, including using APEL within programmes. This objective will contribute to teaching and learning materials and facilitate the dissemination of WBL across the university.

8. **Disseminate findings within the wider community of accreditation practitioners.**

The development of assessment criteria and other findings will also contribute to the dissemination of WBL practices from the CEWBL across the university, to other Centres for Excellence and HEIs.

Conclusion

The literature discussed within this chapter has considered factors that influence APEL from several perspectives. It is evident that there has been little substantial research undertaken on the effect of APEL upon claimants, or the processes used within HE for accreditation and assessment, or by the facilitator. Factors influencing claimants are generally anecdotal and would benefit from further research. The research undertaken so far has been of a survey or case study approach, and a broader and deeper perspective would be valuable to practitioners. There are several different models of APEL in practice, but these may mean different things to different practitioners and they have variable outcomes depending on the type of APEL claims that are being undertaken. The shape and focus of the curriculum for WBL has been discussed and identified as needing to be flexible and responsive to the learner's experience. The

project objectives have been identified and are supported by a summary of issues emergent from practice or the literature.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter discusses the epistemological rationale for choosing a flexible and interpretative research approach and the reasons for using an action research design. Action research will be defined, the research questions will be outlined and the research tools and sampling approach to be used to investigate the project discussed and presented within a plan of the project cycles. Issues of reliability and validity within the research are considered within a qualitative research paradigm. Ethical issues are identified and discussed, particularly in relation to confidentiality when working with colleagues and within one's own practice area, and the consequent dilemmas that may emerge in practitioner research. Finally, the role of the practitioner researcher is explored, as it is central to the philosophy and methodology used.

Research Approach

An interpretative flexible research approach was chosen as it enabled the project design to emerge and develop during the research process (Robson, 2002). A flexible approach allows a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data to be collected, which in the past would have seemed to contradict research's opposing paradigms, but increasingly mixed data collection methods (particularly within real world situations, such as in education) are considered as appropriate and responsive to a project's focus (Robson, 2002). An interpretative paradigm is concerned with an individual's experience by focusing on actions and interactions (Cohen *et al*., 2000), thus reflecting the intention to investigate the experience and explore the multiple realities of all participants, their perceptions and experience. Central to the underpinning epistemology of action research is the researcher as a research instrument herself (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002; Robson, 2002), together with collaboration, participation and critical reflection on actual practice with others (Cohen *et al*., 2000). Rigour in the research process is provided by an audit trail of data generation and analysis, through the use of a learning log and record of the iterative processes, thus exposing the research process to scrutiny

by observers and participants, whilst positioning it within an overarching qualitative epistemology (Robson, 2002).

Action research is a research design commonly seen as a vehicle to improve practice and introduce change (Cohen *et al*., 2000). Initially, change was not intended as an outcome, but after reflection and discussion with colleagues I decided that the examination of a process (i.e. APEL) that has been in place for several years is bound to identify factors that inspire change. McNiff and Whitehead (2002) argue that the whole process of investigation by an action research process in an area that one instinctively feels is worth exploring is a way of learning about one's own practice. By involving others, it leads to further learning, so resulting in an educative process that influences others and leads to personal, professional and social benefit to all involved, thus resonating with the roots of action research as a means of emancipatory social change (Cohen *et al*., 2000).

An alternative research design could have been a case study approach, which was my initial choice, with the emphasis upon accreditation as the unit of analysis to enable generalisation of the findings (Yin, 1994). However, as I reflected upon potential data sources, the need for a collaborative approach with collegial involvement in the research process and cooperation in extracting tacit knowledge of actual practice, it seemed to be more appropriate, both from the epistemological view and the practicalities of the project, to use action research. Similarly, the use of a survey research approach (using both quantitative and qualitative data) was a possibility, either as an exploratory survey to provide new insights to find out what was actually happening, or as a descriptive approach which would have used my knowledge and understanding of the situation and allowed an accurate profile of the people and situation to be portrayed (Robson, 2002). However, I felt these lacked the depth and opportunity for trialling and revision of assessment criteria that a multi-faceted action research approach would provide.

Having chosen action research as the most appropriate approach to be used and identifying project themes from the context and literature, as outlined in Chapters One and Two, three main strands emerge within the project. Firstly, evaluation of the claimants' experience of RAL and its impact upon their work and study. Secondly, investigation of learning and teaching and the information participants need to make

the best of their claims; and thirdly, the criteria used to assess credit volumes in undergraduate programmes.

Research Questions

Consequently the research questions are:

1. How does compiling an accreditation claim affect the undergraduate WBL learner personally, professionally and in his/her potential academic pathway?
2. Are there common themes and types of learning and knowledge from work that emerge for accreditation from undergraduate WBL learners?
3. What facilitation activities enable the learners to recognise and make their learning explicit within the claim?
4. What key features of learning within an accreditation claim are recognised by assessors as having the potential for accreditation?
5. What information is useful for academics and claimants to know when compiling an accreditation claim?
6. How do academics identify and recognise volumes of credit when assessing the areas of learning?

These questions are investigated through an action research approach.

Action Research

Waterman *et al*. define action research as:

> "A period of inquiry, which describes, interprets and explains social situations while executing a change intervention aimed at improvement and involvement. It is problem-focused, context-specific and future-orientated. Action research is a group activity with an explicit critical value basis and is founded on a partnership between action researchers and participants, all of whom are involved in the change process. The participatory process is educative and empowering, involving a dynamic approach in which problem identification, planning, action and evaluation are interlinked. Knowledge may be advanced through reflection and research, and qualitative and quantitative research methods may be employed to collect data. Different types of knowledge may be produced by action research, including practical and propositional. Theory may be generated and refined, and its general application explored through the cycles of the action research process" (2001:11).

This definition identifies the cyclical processes and cooperative participation which are hallmarks of action research and which are explored later in this chapter. It suggests that the research process is initiated from a problem (Cohen *et al*., 2000), but in this case a situation is problematised in order to critically appraise routine practice and generate new insights. The process of APEL was not considered a problem or with determinate difficulties at the start of the project, nor is it intended to become so. However, in the light of the CEWBL with the emphasis on APEL in the first two years, this is a suitable opportunity to appraise the processes and actual practice within the accreditation module. As such, the intention is to review and consider alternatives and additions so that it may become more explicit and enriched.

The ontological theory that underpins action research includes accommodation of multiple perspectives (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002), even when these perspectives are at odds with one another, so the individual researcher must take full cognisance of these multiple perspectives that are generated through participation with others. This recognises the eclecticism of the academics that I am working with, as each have their own perspectives, experience and understandings of the APEL process within WBL. The positionality of the researcher as central to the action research process and as part of the inquiry itself emphasises reflexivity (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005) and investigation into one's practice with others, in order to gain insights into practice within a specific context. These multiple perspectives, combined with the epistemological view that generating knowledge from one's own experience is a living process with learning rooted in experience, critically discerned by reflection upon experience (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002), corroborates the WBL philosophy of being a "knowledge generating practice [that has] its own theory, philosophy and praxis" (Costley 2000:32). Therefore, this is an appropriate approach to determine a practical theory which is located in and generated out of practice, and which aims to make tacit knowledge explicit.

My own practice is part of the inquiry, recognising what is good to build upon and developing an understanding of what needs changing (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002), resulting in action which changes present realities into future ideals. As part of the project is to create criteria to assess RAL credit volume, the notion that these criteria are to be tried and tested before adoption by collegial collaboration is provided for

within the framework of action research cycles of 'Plan', 'Act', 'Observe' and 'Reflect' (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002), thus enabling the development and refinement of criteria for practice.

Action research is often seen as educational research, because it results in learning gained through reflection upon action with the intention of improving a learning situation. Although the CEWBL is recognised as a CETL, improvement is still possible within the WBL programme and this project offers an opportunity to raise standards to improve my own practice, assist my colleagues in teaching and facilitating learning and provide an enhanced educational experience for the students. It can also contribute to the body of knowledge in regard to accreditation of experiential learning within and outside of WBL both internally and externally to the university.

Waterman *et al.* (2001) describe the process of action research as a cycle and note that in practice it is likely to be a number of small-scale evaluations possibly within a larger project, which are reflected upon and small adjustments made, rather than a large-scale evaluation. The implications of a cyclical process suggest that each cycle is concluded before the next one commenced, but where there are a number of differing components to a project, as in this one, some are independent and some are interdependent of the cycles, and therefore each cycle is not always distinct. Table 3.3 summarises each anticipated individual cycle of the planned project, the data collected, the dependencies of each cycle and the desired collaborative interventions with colleagues. Action research aims to involve other participants as co-researchers in the process, although the degree of that involvement may vary (Waterman *et al*., 2001). Feedback to participants from data is intended to make the research usable and shared between participants in an effort to increase their accountability in practice (Cohen *et al*., 2000). Knowledge generated from this process is intended to be both practical (as in the development of criteria for assessment) and also propositional (Eraut, 1994), as in that which underpins and enables the pedagogic facilitation and assessment of APEL.

Data Collection and Desk Work

Both desk work and field work were used to collect data. To gain a holistic and triangulated view of the accreditation process, several data collection streams explored particular aspects. Desk work included a literature search and review, the design and

analysis of a questionnaire collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, the development of structured questions for analysing areas of learning (AOLs), and the development and refining of assessment criteria. A learning log was maintained as part of the desk work, as it recorded the progress of the project through its stages when I returned to 'base' and pondered over the activities undertaken so far. The learning log allowed me to record both the development of the project and of my understanding of the situation and my thinking (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002), as well as providing an audit trail of data. Analysis of reflective essays, assessment of AOLs and use of a computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) package was also desk work, but was interspersed with field work and data collection.

Research Design and Tools

A literature search concerning APEL was undertaken and key themes used to generate a self-completion, semi-structured questionnaire which was sent to all undergraduate students undertaking the RAL module within the academic year of 2004/05. For ease and speed of distribution a purposive sample (Robson, 2002) was used, accessing all those undergraduate students who had gone through the accreditation boards of both the NCWBLP and WBLAU at assessment during that year, having recently experienced the RAL module.

The questionnaire captured the students' perspectives and it was estimated that approximately 60-80 students could be involved. However, the response rate of questionnaires was likely to be only a quarter of this number (Robson, 2002). The questionnaire was based upon the literature regarding the impact of APEL upon personal and professional learning and development, and the facilitation process of undertaking an accreditation module. It was piloted with other students prior to distribution to ensure clarity of the questions, and amended where appropriate. The quantitative responses were analysed using descriptive statistics and Excel software, and the qualitative analysis used thematic and content analysis (Robson, 2002).

The questionnaire used quantitative and qualitative questions, using a Likert scale with just four possible categories to reduce the likelihood of participants choosing the middle answer as a safe response. The questions included positive and negative questions intermingled to allow for validation of answers (Robson, 2002). Gathering

qualitative responses allowed triangulation of the data by including additional perspectives. Due to time restrictions, limited access and involvement of students, it was not possible to gather additional data from them, and it was therefore appropriate to maximise the data collection through this one process in order to strengthen findings (Cohen *et al*., 2000). Triangulation of data also reduced the threat to the validity of the study by incorporating several modes (i.e. quantitative and qualitative) of data collection, as well as different types of data. This could have presented the possibility of discrepancies from the different sources (Robson, 2002), but allowed critical comparisons to be made. Qualitative data from the claimants' reflective essays confirmed or refuted the questionnaire findings. By using different data collection methods and analysis throughout the study and within each cycle, validity was strengthened and any researcher bias was counterbalanced (Robson, 2002). Issues affecting researcher bias are discussed more fully later in the chapter.

Data Collection from Claimants

The respondents were asked to send an electronic copy of either their AOLs or their reflective essay (or both) in response to receipt of the questionnaire. This provided data that could be stored and analysed by a CAQDAS package. There was the potential to be overwhelmed by data, but it was anticipated that not all students would respond and if there was a high response a selection of suitable samples for initial analysis or teaching materials could be made. The use of CAQDAS allowed the analysis of a range of data, because once the themes and key information were initially identified, the rest were analysed by software (Lewins and Silver, 2004). Field work involved the distribution of questionnaires to students and the receipt and collection of electronic data that resulted from their contributions.

Data Analysis

The data analysis tools used depended on the sort of data generated. The initial questionnaire had a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data, and although the main emphasis was qualitative in approach, quantitative data provided some numerical weight of evidence (Robson, 2002) and was analysed using Excel software. The use of statistics was not appropriate, as the numerical data was descriptive in order to describe

the current situation as a starting point of the action research. Exploration of the data showed frequencies of occurrence or numerical consensus to give a view of recent experiences of the participants (Robson, 2002).

The questionnaire qualitative responses were analysed thematically, searching for salient and emergent features (Waterman *et al*., 2001), as was the documentary data analysis from the claimants. The reflective essays were analysed looking for themes relating to the impact of undertaking the RAL module upon the respondents' work and study, then collated by CAQDAS. Themes that emerged relating to the impact upon personal learning and outcomes affecting work, the facilitation of accreditation, identification and articulation of experiential learning, and issues arising from the practical processes of the module, were sought from these essays.

The sample AOLs sent electronically by claimants were used to investigate the assessment and facilitation practices of the academics. Example AOLs were distributed amongst volunteer academics. As part of another CEWBL activity, a questionnaire was sent to all WBL academic staff, asking for volunteers who were interested in participating in this project by analysing some examples of AOLs and being interviewed about the process of APEL. Ten colleagues were willing to participate, representing a wide spread of experience in terms of longevity of service and APEL assessment at all levels of WBL programmes.

Depending upon the numbers of claimants responding with examples, two or three examples of AOLs were identified, anonymised and distributed to each academic for assessment and comments. The timing of this was crucial, as this activity could not overlap with an assessment period or the beginning or end of a semester when academics are involved in processing assessment materials, as they would be distracted and feel pressured. Part of my role as an insider researcher was to judge when a good time would occur and work towards that. A list of questions was identified from the literature and the research questions to guide the analyses. As part of a controlled assessment trial where no-one but myself knew who the examples were from or who else was likely to be assessing the same one, it was hoped that at least two academics would assess each area of learning (AOL) independently. This provided a degree of quality monitoring of the assessment process itself, as well as providing interesting feedback to share with my colleagues about accreditation assessment as a whole.

Following distribution of the AOLs, semi-structured interviews with each academic were arranged, in which they were asked to describe their assessment of their allocated AOL and then talk through the process of facilitation of RAL claims and how they identified learning from the examples. Semi-structured interviews are used to focus on information that is not known by the researcher, but which is anticipated as being found by structured questioning of the participants (Cohen *et al*., 2000). Investigating facilitation activities when teaching and assessing AOLs within the RAL module would explore academics' experiences and capture their individual approaches, particularities and skills in this area (Cohen *et al*., 2000). These interviews were tape recorded so that the assessor could 'think aloud' their practice (Price, 2005) and so that their reasoning, decisions and tacit knowledge could be captured, with questions being asked by the interviewer to probe where necessary, without having to take written notes and trying to keep up with the flow of conversation. The interviews were transcribed and analysed by seeking out specific information in relation to assessment of credit volumes, facilitation of the RAL module, assessment and accreditation practices, and any other themes related to the RAL module that emerged during analysis. The assessment of each AOL by more than one colleague validated data by inter-rater reliability (Cohen *et al*., 2000), confirming consistency of the assessment approach. Again, CAQDAS was used to aid qualitative analysis and coding.

From the interviews, assessment criteria for determining the volume of credit were generated. The 'tacit' knowledge of assessment that colleagues used for volumes of credit was identified and reconstructed from the interviews, then criteria for assessment of credit volume was generated, tried and tested through at least one assessment period. It was then evaluated from comments of colleagues and further modified before being introduced into the RAL module teaching materials.

The creation and refining of assessment criteria were the more challenging action research cycles of the research process, as this required full cooperation by all colleagues together with their engagement and participation in trialling the assessment criteria and giving feedback in order to inform the next iteration. Personal persuasion and appreciation of contributions was required to maintain the interest and cooperation of colleagues. Again timing was crucial, so that the review period fitted unobtrusively outside the assessment calendar of the university. It was hoped to include project

progress reports in some of the curriculum development meetings or parts thereof, with as many academic colleagues being present as possible, in order to stimulate dialogue regarding the use of the assessment criteria and encourage collegial engagement and involvement as part of the collaborative process (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002).

Analysis of the AOLs was desk work and included identification of examples for teaching and learning materials, and comparisons of the findings between colleagues and my own assessment. During this action research cycle, key examples were annotated in order to provide examples for use later by both students and colleagues, and these were informed by reflection upon colleagues' ideas, comments and annotations. This is part of the CEWBL work of developing teaching and learning resources and making them available for use by others linked to the CEWBL. Discussions were held with RAL module leaders to explore how new assessment criteria could be integrated into the module resource packs and the virtual learning environment (VLE). Each module leader was responsible for their own modules' VLE and the teaching and learning content within it, and all contributions from other academics, including myself, had to be accepted, adopted and understood by the module leader to be included. A good practice guide for academics facilitating RAL claimants was also devised to become part of the teaching and learning resources about APEL to be made available to colleagues across the university.

Guidance was written for claimants to enable them to maximise their accreditation claims, so that they could aim to complete their accreditation claims at the first attempt and submit improved RAL claims. The guidance elaborated upon the assessment criteria to make them explicit.

There will be dissemination activities related to the assessment criteria within the RAL module across the schools and they will be shared as appropriate outside the university. These future dissemination activities are unlikely to be completed by the end of this project, as they will be on-going and open to feedback from use by facilitators, claimants and the external APEL community. These dissemination activities have partially begun in that there have been contacts with staff in other universities who are interested in the project and offers to trial it have already come from more than one university, for example, through e-portfolios and e-APEL, and another Centre for

Excellence in Practice Based Learning is interested in using the findings to relate to work based projects.

A full summary of the cycles and anticipated activity is shown in Table 3.3 at the end of the chapter, and the process of a cycle is considered below in terms of its contribution to each stage of the project. The process of action research has been described as a self-reflective spiral of plan, act, observe and reflect, where planning is the determination of a certain objective, followed by action towards achieving that objective; these actions are then observed to see to what extent the objective has been achieved, being then followed by reflective evaluation whereby insights generated by the process are considered and fed into the next cycle (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). These cycles are designed to run over several months, so although it appears as if several activities are concurrent, in reality a time lapse between each stage is likely, thereby allowing other work commitments and priorities to be weaved around the project processes.

Cycle 1

This cycle evaluated the students' experiences of the RAL module and gathered data to be used in the next cycle. The students' experiences were drawn from the questionnaires and reflective essays.

Cycle 2

This cycle revolved around the distribution of AOLs for blind assessment by colleagues, and the generation of initial assessment criteria from taped semi-structured interviews with academics for further development in the next cycle.

Cycle 3

The initial assessment criteria was trialled through an assessment period and feedback gained from colleagues as to ease of use and application. The interviews were transcribed and analysed to generate information for guidance for both claimants and academics.

Cycle 4

This final cycle included amendment of assessment criteria and application to practice by including it into the teaching and learning resources for the module, requiring collegial collaboration to incorporate new material into the teaching materials. It also involved writing guidance for claimants and academics.

The level of collaboration from other participants in each cycle will be variable depending on the progress of the project (Waterman *et al*., 2001) and the outstanding research activity at a given time. However, this tends to reflect the real world of doing a project at work, which has to run alongside other pressing imperatives of an organisation and the engagement of colleagues in collaboration with a project that does not contribute to them personally, although it does contribute to the organisation. Some of these issues will be explored more fully in the context of the insider researcher and the project activities. Table 3.3 shows activities in more detail, together with their dependencies and data collection.

In order to follow the thread through the different data streams and research activities, Table 3.1 summarises the data collected to achieve each project objective as stated in Chapter Two.

Table 3.1: Project Objectives and Data Collection Tools Used to Meet Objectives

Objective	Data Collection Tools and Processes
1. Undertake a literature search and extensive reading around APEL	Documentary analysis leading to key themes from literature to inform tools of inquiry
2. Investigate undergraduate WBL students' experiences when compiling a RAL claim	Questionnaire to explore students' experiences of RAL module Electronic copies of reflective essay to seek out comments regarding impact of RAL on work
3. Explore the impact of accreditation upon students' work and study programmes	Questionnaire and reflective essay analysis
4. Explore the skills and techniques used by facilitators and assessors of the RAL module	A comparison of AOLs assessed by colleagues and myself Semi-structured interviews of assessors to explore teaching, facilitation and assessment activities
5. Create teaching and learning resources to support facilitators of the RAL module	Semi-structured interview findings Supporting literature themes
6. Develop criteria for assessing general credit volume in RAL claims	Data from semi-structured interviews and comparisons between claims Draft and pilot criteria for volume assessment through assessment period: first evaluation by colleagues
7. Introduce the teaching and learning resources and assessment criteria for RAL into current practice within WBL programmes	Data from semi-structured interviews Documentary evaluation of resources shared with and feedback from colleagues: second evaluation of assessment criteria
8. Disseminate findings within the wider community of accreditation practitioners	Internal and external dissemination through work group meetings, conference presentations e.g. SEEC [3], UALL[4] / UVAC[5] / HEA[6] etc Participation in joint external APEL projects as part of CEWBL activities

[3] Southern England Education Consortium.
[4] Universities Association of Lifelong Learning.
[5] University Vocational Awards Council.
[6] Higher Education Academy.

Research Bias

Herr and Anderson (2005) observe that the action researcher is likely to have distinct 'tacit' knowledge of the research site, which raises both logistical and epistemological issues, as data from the inquiry is likely to be filtered through the researcher's own bias, prejudices and unexamined assumptions and impressions which could challenge the validity of the study and therefore require counter measures to provide a balance. Consequently, positioning this within a flexible qualitative research approach accepts at the outset that the researcher starts from a real world perspective that rejects the notion of theory neutral language (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005), but recognises that sources of bias and assumptions must be acknowledged and accepted as inevitable within the research process (Robson, 2002). As such, I recognised at the outset of the project that all the data and research activities are coloured with my personal perspectives; being female and positioned in the exclusivity of the CEWBL rather than the mainstream WBL. Therefore, there were limits as to how effective my personal filtering of subjective data interpretations would be. Indeed, these interpretations were central to my position as the practitioner researcher, as they reflected both the context and my positionality within the WBL centre, as well as my experience and foreknowledge. However, mechanisms to deal with these issues of bias were integrated into the project in order to address my potential distortion of data interpretation. The way to monitor this was by the use of epistemic reflexivity (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005), which meant I would try to observe my behaviour within the research setting as well as keeping a personal learning log to reflect upon progress, and by recorded data gathering and analysis activities, personal thoughts, insights and revelations.

The terms 'validity' and 'reliability' are used in positivist traditional research approaches when identifying quality criteria for research, but in the qualitative field these may termed 'goodness', trustworthiness', 'credibility' or 'workability' (Herr and Anderson, 2005). These terms are intended to make the research believable to others, to validate and to add rigour to the research process. In action research, the aim is to demonstrate change and provide evidence of improvement for others to scrutinise (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002). In terms of validation of my findings, I needed to consult my colleagues and critical friends and invite them to challenge my judgments and offer alternative perspectives (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002). Some critical scrutiny by others had been built into the 'observe' and 'reflect' processes within the

cycles, but there were opportunities to share with other academics (both internally and externally) who were not directly involved with the research but who could question my assumptions and contribute to the reflective processes (Herr and Anderson, 2005).

Herr and Anderson offer some quality indicators for action research instead of the positivist concepts of reliability and validity, and propose five quality alternatives, which are 'outcome', 'process', 'democratic', 'catalytic' and 'dialogic' (2005:54), which reflect the five goals of action research that they have devised. They argue that the application of such criteria should be critically examined by those involved in the project, particularly if the researcher has a higher position in the organisational hierarchy, as a position of power may prevent a true critical appraisal of findings by the researcher. Measures taken to maintain validity are tabled alongside the quality indicators in Table 3.2 below. Awareness of my position as Academic Head of Operations implicated power and responsibility, particularly in terms of expertise and position, even if legitimate authority with colleagues is limited. This was a factor to consider as the project progressed. Additionally, other obstacles may have presented when change was introduced, such as finances, time allowance and personnel costs, and these were also considered during the project process.

Generalisation

Herr and Anderson (2005) suggest that the findings of action research may be seen to be generalisable if transferable from one situation to another, but that can only be confirmed by the person wishing to make the transfer rather than the original investigator. It is unlikely that a direct transfer to a similar situation elsewhere could be made, as few other universities practise APEL in the same way that MU does, although there may be similarities of practice. However, there may be other applications where the assessment criteria could be adapted for use, in which case another instigator will need to adapt the outcomes to apply to such a situation. It is possible that other developments in APEL, particularly e-APEL, may develop during this research project which could adapt the outcomes elsewhere. Internally, the project should impact upon the way MU practises APEL through the RAL module and this will be devolved to the schools through the CEWBL, as the CEWBL targets include extending the use of APEL across the university, including research developments across the curriculum. Externally, the project findings will be disseminated through publications, such as the

CEWBL evaluation, but also through conference proceedings, of which opportunities will become available as other CETLs share their activities and invite others to contribute. Such activities will enable the spread and dissemination of research findings with the uptake of new ideas and practices, and the opportunity to generalise and apply these findings may become more apparent over time.

Table 3.2: Quality/Validity Criteria and Actions to Ensure Criteria Met

Adapted from Herr and Anderson (2005)

No.	Goals of Action Research	Quality/Validity Criteria	Measures Taken to Maintain Validity
1	The generation of new knowledge	Dialogic and process validity	Dialogic: *discussions with colleagues and feedback on data and model development* Process: *triangulation of data collection methods, personal and collegial reflection upon findings*
2	The achievement of action-orientated outcomes	Outcome validity	Actions which resolve the problem: *generation and trialling of a model for credit volume assessment, and amendments to module*
3	The education of both researcher and participants	Catalytic validity	Re-orientates participants towards change: *increased understanding by participants promotes and embeds change in practice and raises critical awareness*
4	Results that are relevant to the local setting	Democratic validity	Extent of collaboration: *each cycle invites collegial responses and application of new learning to practice*
5	A sound and appropriate research methodology	Process validity	Framing and solving problems using new learning: *audit trail of evidence and learning log, triangulation of data sources*

Ethical Issues

Permission to use data gathered in the course of my work had been negotiated with the Director of the CEWBL and the Head of HSS WBLA Unit, both of whom agreed my

access to students and staff. I also enquired as to whether permission from either of the schools' ethics committees was required, and guidance from my supervisor and the Director of the CEWBL indicated that such permission was unnecessary. My position of power and authority within the CEWBL could have made staff feel that they were compelled to contribute to the project, but I hoped that this was not an issue as they all knew me and my working relationship with them was, I hope, a collegial one that did not compromise either myself or my colleagues, and it was likely that the relationship would be reciprocal. If I collected data during routine activities with staff, I ensured that colleagues knew that I would be using that data towards the project, to allow them to decide whether to participate or not. Nevertheless, I hoped that the project held an intrinsic interest for them, as it explored their own practice and skills as facilitators of learning, and the use of action research allowed critical reflection upon practice in order to improve personal practice (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002). However, difficulties could have occurred if there was exposure of poor practice among my colleagues and I could have found myself in an ethical dilemma resulting from such a revelation as to how to have dealt with the findings.

Questionnaires were accompanied by a letter and consent form informing the students of the intentions of the project, and to ask for their participation by voluntarily sending the CEWBL a copy of their reflective essays and/or some of their AOLs electronically. This ensured that students gave their informed consent to the use of this data for the purposes of the project by means of their participation, as by sending an electronic copy they indicated consent, as well as signing and returning a consent form which was stored separately from any other university records. The questionnaires were tracked so that reminders could be sent out, but not so that individual students could be traced and their privacy invaded. Students could have felt that if they had not responded they might be put at a disadvantage in their academic programme, or that any comments they made about the process would be traced back to them and therefore they might have felt uncomfortable in responding. Therefore, as an academic within a department that they are studying with, I tried to preserve their anonymity as far as possible and reassured them of that fact. In relation to students who might have felt obliged to respond in case their programme was compromised, I had no direct involvement with any of the NCWBLP students, only the health students, and at the time of collecting data my changed role meant that I was not in a direct position as an academic advisor, thus protecting their confidentiality and reducing any undue influence because of my

position over them. Being a member of this academic community might have resulted in assumptions being made in terms of recognition of tacit knowledge, or putting my own interpretation upon data which resulted from my previous knowledge but which was not that of the respondent, and therefore I needed to question my interpretations and involve others in the analysis and interpretation.

All the reflective essays and AOLs were stored under pseudonyms so that they could not be traced to individuals. Likewise, interviews with the facilitators were anonymised and although within a small department it is difficult to protect the identity of everyone, I endeavoured to do so by anonymising data and limiting personalisation of individuals.

Practitioner Researcher

As a practitioner and insider researcher in my own institution, I had a variety of roles within this project. The university identified in its then current corporate plan that WBL was a strength within the university to be built upon. In the award for CEWBL, the dissemination of APEL skills and WBL were key factors in the plan, as well as making a contribution to achieving the goals of the CETL (NCWBLP, 2004). My position in the CEWBL made me responsible for the dissemination of good practice in teaching and learning that the centre represents. The resource materials and research findings will be shared with colleagues both within and outside the university, the community of practice of other CETLs and other universities initiating WBL in the UK, thus possibly providing additional proving grounds.

My role gave me the authority to work with colleagues and draw on their tacit knowledge and skills that are often 'taken for granted' as part of their accreditation facilitator role. As a practitioner and a member of the CEWBL team, I had privileged access to a wider community of practitioners (Lave and Wenger, 1991) than I had previously, thus extending the scope and potential impact of this project. Being a worker researcher in WBL gave me a unique insight into this position in that it enabled me to appreciate the skills, knowledge and resources that my colleagues and students contributed. However, this dual position also had its negative points. It meant that I might become enmeshed by the "messy, difficult to access, multiple realities of organisational life" (Smyth and Holian, 1999:2) and lose my way. There is added stress within a project when trying to maintain organisational relationships, conduct research

and fulfil other job requirements, and these can all contribute to the challenges of insider research (Smyth and Holian, 1999). Being in a position where I was situated in the CEWBL and therefore outside the WBL units of both schools allowed me some distance and reflexivity upon the progress of the project. My position in the CEWBL provided me with maximum resources in terms of access to respondents, data and collegial expertise in subject knowledge. I was aware of the demands on my colleagues and had insider knowledge as to peak activity periods, together with knowledge of propitious opportunities to seek assistance and collaboration. However, undertaking a project that is carried out under the very noses of my doctoral academic advisers and direct manager put me in a very exposed position. If I had failed to complete the project or upset my colleagues during the process, but had not acknowledged these things or sought to address these problems, then I would not be practising reflectively or sensitively and would have failed to work collaboratively, thus impacting on the project and risking negation of my findings. Awareness of such issues and potential problems helped me to tackle only those things that I could be sure of, and plan my actions cautiously.

Herr and Anderson (2005) offer a continuum of positionality analysis of the insider researcher in collaboration with others using a framework of **'**Outsider: Inside / Insider: Outside**',** indicating different stances that a researcher within an action research project might take, and warn that power relations still operate even when insiders think they are being collaborative. Their continuum suggested that I had the possibility of two positions within this project: one as the insider collaborating with insiders, and another as an outsider collaborating with insiders; both of which could contribute to an improved knowledge base and critiqued practice, impacting organisational development with potential for transformational change. The difference between the two approaches related to the size of the group with which the researcher was working, the former being a study or inquiry group or team, the latter tending towards radical change and wider organisational learning. This is significant for this project, because at times I was more of an insider than outsider, and vice versa, and sometimes the emphasis was a self study (as in 'what do I bring to it?'); as in the need to bring meaning and understanding to my practice (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002). Alternatively, I had to consider the wider agenda - that of the CEWBL, my position and the power associated with that of the 'expert' professional and of hierarchical position and consequently within the wider APEL community. There was a need to be an agent

of change and the instigator and driver of the project, as well as awareness that others delivered the module and as such had knowledge to contribute or withhold. I had considerable tacit knowledge to bring to the situation, and although I recognised that it was biased, prejudiced and full of assumptions, I hoped to be able to contribute to the data meaningfully, by allowing myself to become a respondent as well as a researcher (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002). My assumptions could be challenged during the project, and my views and interpretation of practice might change. However, it is because of my expert knowledge that I intended to include myself as a participant with tacit knowledge to offer, but consequently I had to take a reflexive stance when analysing and interpreting it. My role as participant, worker and researcher was explored as the project progressed and is discussed in the next chapter of project activity and findings.

Table 3.3: Planned Action Research Phases September 2005 - September 2007

Cycle		Data Collected	Dependencies	Collaborative Activities	Timescale
CYCLE 1 Plan 1	Literature search/review. Student questionnaire. Questions for interviews.	(Personal learning log maintained throughout each phase). Structured questions designed for analysis of areas of learning.	Questionnaire depends on literature. Student responses to questionnaire. Assistance from administration team to access lists of students.	Administrative support to receive and collate questionnaires.	Sept – Oct 2005
Action 1	Distribute student questionnaire. Devise structured questions for interviews.	Student questionnaire responses. Electronic AOLs and reflective essays received. Returned questionnaire gains consent and gathers qualitative data. AOLs received for analysis.	Generation of qualitative data depends on student responses.		November 06
Observe 1	Analysis of questionnaire. Analysis of reflective essays	Student perceptions of the accreditation process. Student perceptions of impact of accreditation on work sought. Student comments on factors assisting in the articulation of AOL gathered.	Depends on students sending electronic copies of both AOLs and reflective essays. Research assistance to analyse reflective essay data by NVivo.		Jan - March 06
Reflect 1	Findings of questionnaire. Findings of reflective essays.	Student responses to facilitation of accreditation collated. Key themes from reflective essays concerning impact in work place.		Sharing and discussing findings with colleagues and student representatives.	Nov - Dec 05

Cycle		Data Collected	Dependencies	Collaborative Activities	Timescale
CYCLE 2 Plan 2	Engagement of colleagues. Distribute areas of learning for assessment. Structured questions for analysis and interview.		Receipt of data from students. Avoidance of university's assessment period for interviews.	Engagement of colleagues more fully into project by drawing on their knowledge and experience.	Feb 06
Action 2	Interview colleagues. Identify initial criteria for assessment. Share findings of questionnaire in Board of Studies (BoS).	Oral data from interviews for assessment categories. AOL comments for analysis and comparisons between assessors and AOLs.	Engagement of colleagues in assessment process. Avoidance of assessment period.	BoS involves invited student representatives.	Mar - May 06
Observe 2	Initial criteria emerge. Compare AOLs from assessors and assess AOLs independently. Feedback from BoS.	Learning log feedback from BoS.	Interview data collected in time to create first draft assessment categories.	Colleagues give feedback on draft assessment categories.	May - June 06
Reflect 2	Assessment criteria. Comparisons of assessment of AOLs.	Themes for analysis, models for practice, tips for guidance from facilitators/assessors. Comparisons of data from interviews, AOL assessment and use of draft assessment categories.	Analysis and comparisons of AOLs.		June – August 06

Cycle		Data Collected	Dependencies	Collaborative Activities	Timescale
CYCLE 3 Plan 3	Revise assessment criteria for assessment period trial. Get student interviews transcribed.	Evaluation of first draft. Transcribed interviews for analysis.	Areas of learning examples submitted from claimants. Transcribed interviews.	Interviews with individual staff members.	April - September 06
Action 3	Distribute revised assessment criteria to colleagues for use in semester 1 assessment period. Analyse taped interviews. Draft guidance for claimants & assessors to maximise accreditation claims.	Analysed AOLs. Revised categories for assessment model. Teaching and learning information from interviews.	Appropriate information gained through student interviews.	Revised assessment categories and initial guidelines distributed to teaching staff for semester 1.	
Observe 3	Analyse student interviews using NVivo to see themes emerging. Findings emerging from data for guidance for assessors and students. Feedback from assessment criteria considered.	Analysis of student interviews, both manually and using CAQDAS. Send transcribed interviews back to respondents. Comments and feedback to validate/amend model.	Interview data collated in time to revise assessment criteria to trial during semester 1.	Trialling and amendment of assessment criteria, inviting feedback from colleagues and claimant contributors to review model.	June - October 06
Reflect 3	Data from second trial of assessment criteria. Amend criteria. Criteria from interviews.	Collegial evaluation form of RAL. Categories from interviews.	Feedback from second trial through assessment period and prepare to use during teaching and assessment in semester 1.	Sharing of draft guidance with assessors.	June 06 – Jan 07

Cycle		Data Collected	Dependencies	Collaborative Activities	Timescale
CYCLE 4 Plan 4	Assessment end semester 1 evaluation strategy for assessment criteria. Plan time for collaborative activities and RAL teaching team discussions. Plan teaching and learning guidance for assessors. Plan internal and external dissemination activities via Internet, WebCT and conference presentations.	Feedback from evaluation of assessment categories end semester 1/06. Finalise volume descriptors. Teaching and learning materials for RAL module. New guidance for teaching and learning activities and resource pack.	Suitable web page created for external access. Appropriate examples of teaching and learning generated.	Working with ICT resources and personnel within university.	Dec 06 – May 07 to collect all data. Dissemination from May 2007 – ongoing
Act 4	Evaluate latest trial of assessment. Amend assessment criteria in light of feedback. Assessment criteria and other teaching resources shared. External dissemination opportunities.	Assessment criteria feedback from colleagues for final amendment. Examples of work generated to use in module materials, virtual learning environment and training workshops for spreading accreditation through university. Feedback on criteria.	Feedback from colleagues.	Discussions with RAL module leaders for integration. Discussions with administration staff for deadlines of new copy and inclusion on VLE.	Feb 07 – May 07
Observe 4	Review of RAL module resources and learning activities. Contributions from assessment and semi-structured interviews.	Comments and feedback from colleagues to contribute to validity of assessment categories and practice guidelines.	Cooperation from colleagues who are module leaders to accept new teaching materials.	As above.	As above.
Reflect 4	Review module resources as a whole and reflect on findings of assessment criteria. Reflect on project processes and outcomes. Dissemination activities and opportunities to share with other practitioners from the community of practice.	Assessment criteria, now termed 'volume descriptors'. Additional ideas and reflections on volume descriptors. Write project report reflecting on learning log and data collected.	Feedback at appropriate stages from colleagues. External and internal events at which to share findings.	Collegial cooperation.	October 06 – April 07 On-going from May 2007 -

CHAPTER FOUR

PROJECT ACTIVITY AND FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter considers the collection of data through the cycles of activity which, for consistency, are recorded as the 'plan, act, observe and reflect' (Cohen *et al*., 2000) phases through each cycle. The activity within each cycle will be discussed in the 'plan' and 'act' phase, and the findings integrated into the observation and reflection phases. It will show how each previous cycle contributes to the next one, and how each cycle links to the objective that was the driver for the project activity.

Using an action research structure throughout the project process provides a framework for data collection whilst changes in practice are implemented. As the project progressed, it became apparent that data generation informed the next cycle (Herr and Anderson, 2005). It also became apparent that rather than being discrete cycles of activity, a spiral-like process occurred, as each 'cycle' concluded at another level upwards as the 'observe' and 'reflect' phases informed the following planning and actions. This, Herr and Anderson (2005) argue, is an evolving methodology in response to the context, so that while the steps of the action research spiral remains the same, broadening the scope of the data collection in order to gain further insights into the situation is necessary, although this could not be previously anticipated. This demonstrates the need for a flexible research design.

Cycle 1

This cycle evaluated the student experience of the RAL module and gathered documentary data to be used in the next cycle. The claimant perspective was drawn from the questionnaires and reflective essays. A flowchart summarising the process that claimants usually follow to complete the RAL module is presented in Figure 4.1 to assist the reader to understand the stages of the current module. This cycle aimed to achieve the first three objectives of the project, which were to explore the relevant

literature, investigate the student experience of RAL and to explore the impact of RAL upon the students' work and study.

Plan 1

Literature review

The plan was to gather relevant literature to inform a literature review and create a claimant questionnaire. A learning log was also commenced. Literature relating to APEL, WBL and experiential learning were collected as described in Chapter Two. Information was gathered over a number of months and read and reread, but it took some time before it began to focus into useful information with which to inform the project. It was apparent that there was a lot of discursive and anecdotal information and observation, but little hard evidence or research on which to build. Within the literature, the focus on APEL varied depending on how it was used in a given HE programme and whether it was at undergraduate or postgraduate level. There was very little research related to the student experience of APEL; most of it was anecdotal or case study illustrations, and very little at undergraduate level other than case studies from specific HEIs, but this did enable a range of my personal intuitive concepts and anecdotal information from others to inform the creation of a questionnaire. Reading generated questions for academic interviews in a later cycle.

Access to participants

Gaining access and consent from participants was also started at the earliest stages of the project, as previous research experience and supervision of others' projects indicated that approval may take a long time, particularly if approvals from ethics committees were involved. It was possible that as students were involved, the school's ethics committee would have required notification that students were to be involved. However, formal consent was obtained from the Director of the NCWBLP and CEWBL, and the Head of the WBLAU in the HSSc during the programme planning stage, and neither considered it necessary to pursue further formal permission as evaluation of the student experience was already part of our quality mechanism. Access to staff and students was agreed and no additional measures were required other than those that I had planned, which was a letter of explanation to accompany a

questionnaire and consent form to be signed and returned to give permission to use any data.

Collation of lists of students who were eligible to be included involved gaining lists from the WBL administrators of students who had been awarded credit during the previous academic year. This was complicated by some students who had submitted claims in two semesters, so that original numbers were slightly fewer than anticipated. A database was created and all students were given a number which was also put onto their individual questionnaires and consent forms, so that when they were returned those who had responded could be identified and reminder letters could be targeted. All administrative information was stored and retained confidentially and made inaccessible to other staff.

Act 1

Creating the questionnaire

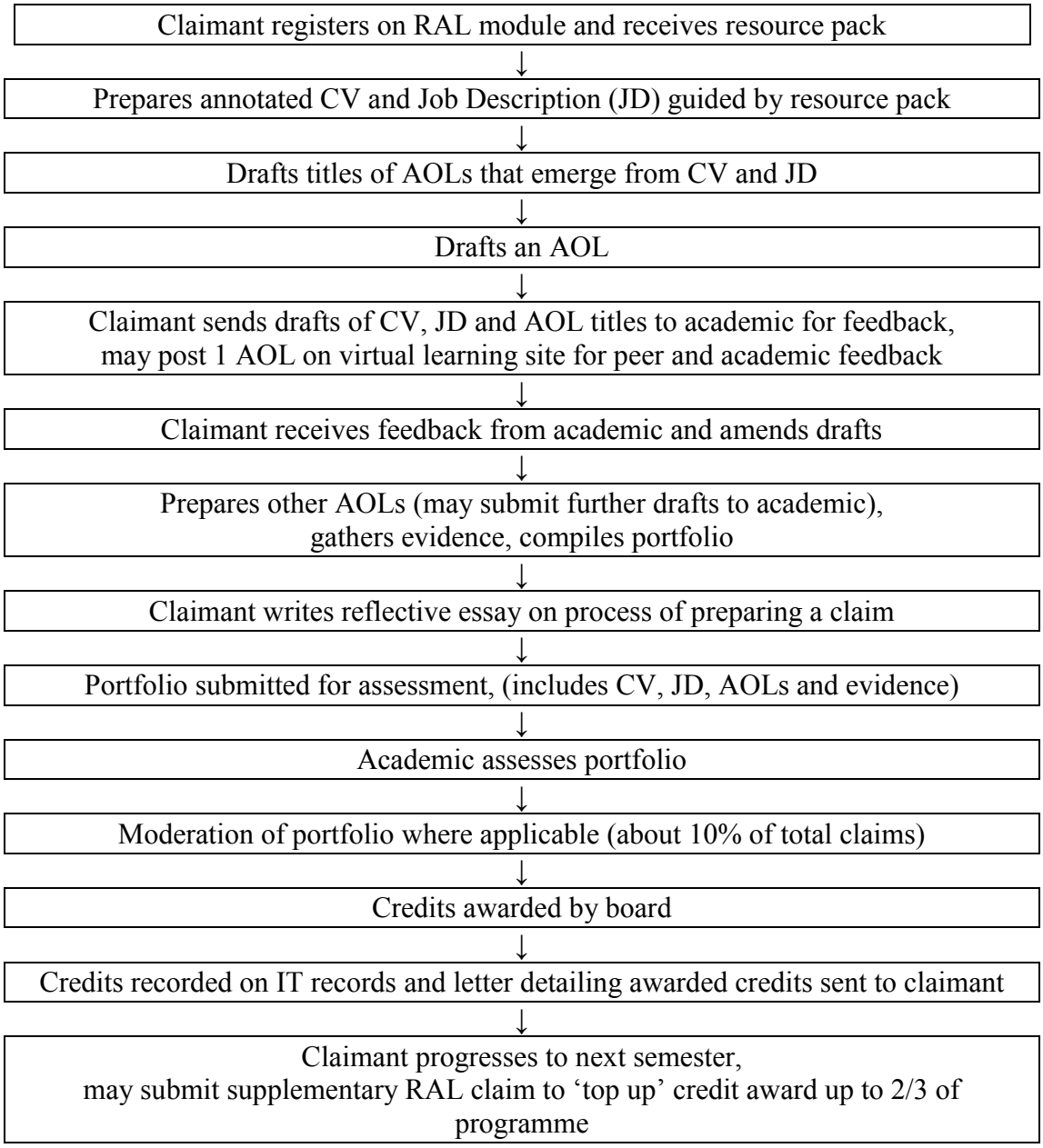
The questionnaire was developed from three sources of information. Firstly, from the literature relating to making an APEL claim from the student's viewpoint; secondly, a questionnaire had been trialled with just health students two years previously, of which some questions were similar and using them again assisted the piloting process of the questions as these had already demonstrated reliability. The third source of information for the questionnaire related to the anecdotal evidence reported by colleagues and students as to the impact of undertaking the RAL module as part of a programme of study. This meant that aspects of the learning process, such as use of learning resources and activities, were included for validation and verification by claimants.

Piloting the questionnaire

Following the creation of the questionnaire (see Appendix 3), several colleagues and some postgraduate students trialled it and provided feedback with regard to wording and sequencing of questions. Postgraduate students trialled it as the actual group to receive the questionnaire were to be undergraduates and I did not want to exclude from the project any undergraduates who could potentially be included in the sample.

The questionnaire was divided into sections, starting with when the module had been taken and whether it was an application for general or specific credit. The titles of AOLs were requested, and the claimants were asked which of these they thought were the most important.

Figure 4.1: Flowchart Summarising the Claimant's Usual Process Through the Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (RAL) Module



The questions then asked about how their work and personal learning had been impacted (Question (Q)6), the effect on their learning style (Q7), identification of areas of learning (Q8), activities that had helped identify learning (Q9), activities that helped uncover experiential learning (Q10, Q11), on-line support to RAL (Q12), impact of RAL on their work role (Q13) and finally any other comments (Q14). The use of quantitative and qualitative data was to try to gather a range of responses and to provide some insightful detail as to the student experience. Sixty two questionnaires

were sent out, of which five were sent by email to Cyprus to make it easier for their return and to reduce losses in the post abroad. A database was created which recorded all students who had undertaken the undergraduate accreditation claim. It was discovered after sending questionnaires out that there were some duplicates due to students submitting more than one RAL claim within the academic year, so the final number was 58 questionnaires.

Some claimants submitted additional RAL claims to increase the credit towards their degree if their first claim did not realise as much credit as desired. The benefits of this for the claimant is to shorten the programme and the fee for accreditation is capped, thus making it more cost effective and quicker than having to take additional project modules to ensure sufficient credit towards the degree. The claimants are guided by their academics in relation to the number of AOLs to be submitted, but it is an imprecise art to anticipate the amount of credit that a claim might warrant, hence the opportunity to submit more than one claim.

Distributing the questionnaire

Each self-completion questionnaire included a consent form to be signed and returned together in a stamped addressed envelope (see Appendices 3 and 4). Each questionnaire was numbered so that I could trace all responses and send reminders to those who had not yet responded, to increase the response rate (Robson, 2002). A letter (see Appendix 2) also accompanied it, explaining what the questionnaire was for and why they had been invited to contribute. An electronic copy of the reflective essay and/or an AOL were requested from each claimant, seeking written permission to use them as data and teaching examples. A low response rate at the cut-off date resulted in another reminder letter to those respondents that had not replied and a further four questionnaires were received, bringing the total to n = 15. Interestingly, there was proportionately a higher response rate from students in the WBLAU, who were likely to know my name, and I put this down to the fact that they knew me by association with the programme, although none were directly supervised by me at the time. Low response rates are a common problem with self-completion questionnaires (Robson, 2002) and other ways of increasing the response rate could have been employed. However, as the questionnaire was intended to be descriptive and to portray a profile of the accreditation process from the student's experience, large

sample numbers were not essential to a good outcome, although unfortunately it did mean that there would not be a weight of evidence to support the anecdotal feedback, which was disappointing.

Requests for electronic data

Electronic copies of the reflective essays and AOLs received were analysed thematically for illustrations of the impact upon work, personal and professional life as a result of engaging in the RAL module. The analysis occurred some time later, when convenient, and required immersion in the data to become familiar with it (Silverman, 1993).

During this phase, the questions to be asked of academics were prepared, drawing from the literature and the same themes as the claimants, and included requests for learning activities that facilitated experiential learning and the RAL process (see Appendix 4).

Observe 1

Questionnaire results

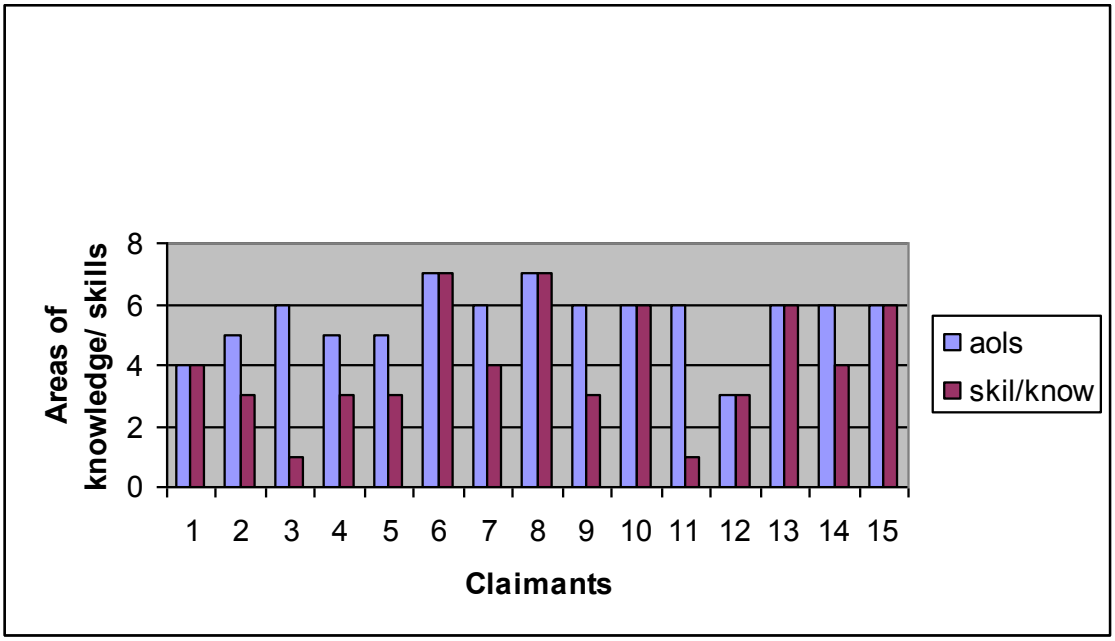
The questionnaire started by requesting which undergraduate RAL module had been used; 14 of 15 had used the RAL module for general credit and only one claimant used the module for specific credit to match to specific learning outcomes. Analysis of the questionnaire was undertaken by using an Excel spreadsheet after data was recorded manually, aided by the low response numbers.

Question 3: *"Please list the titles of your areas of learning"*

This question asked for the titles of the AOLs, as it was intended to analyse these to identify whether there were themes in the titles that reflected the types of learning acquired from work. Figure 4.2 shows that of the 15 respondents, the numbers of AOLs submitted ranged from 1-7. The next question asked for the main skills and knowledge that the claimant considered to be the most important to have recognised and accredited. For seven of the respondents these were the same as their AOLs, but others mentioned things like "*my knowledge of children"*, or "*problem solving that*

experience brings", thus identifying skills that could be transdisciplinary or at the core of their work role.

Figure 4.2: Number of AOLs and Skills and Knowledge Considered by Claimants to be Most Important



Since there was a relatively low response rate to the questionnaire, it was decided to access all the student records in that academic year who had undertaken RAL in order to undertake further analysis on them (Figures 4.3 - 4.5), showing how many credits and at what academic level they were awarded. This proved difficult in places, as a number of claimants had several levels of credits awarded for the same titled AOL, and determining the number of AOLs submitted per individual was complicated.

Figure 4.3: Distribution of Credits Awarded to Claimants, nos 1-30

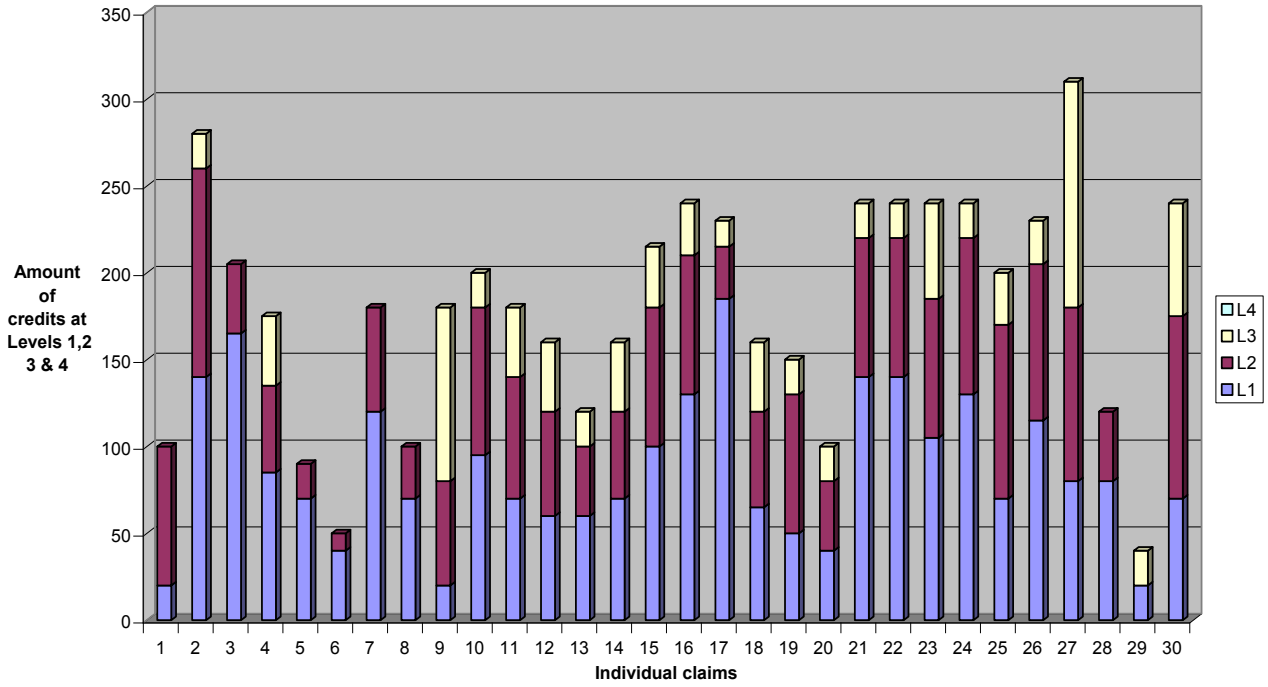
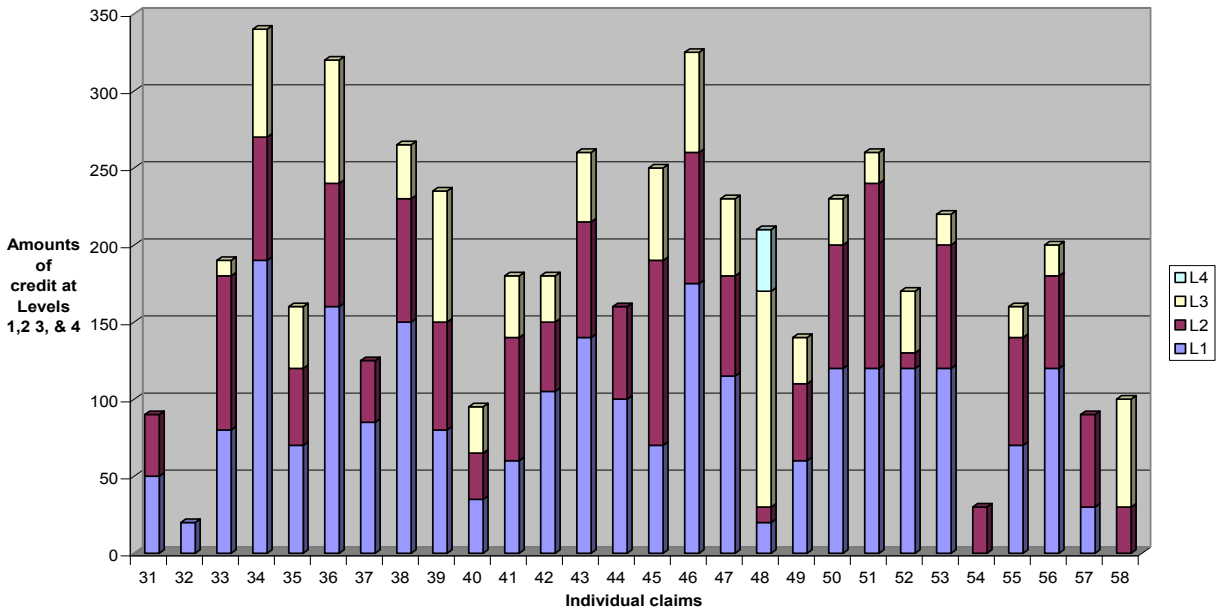
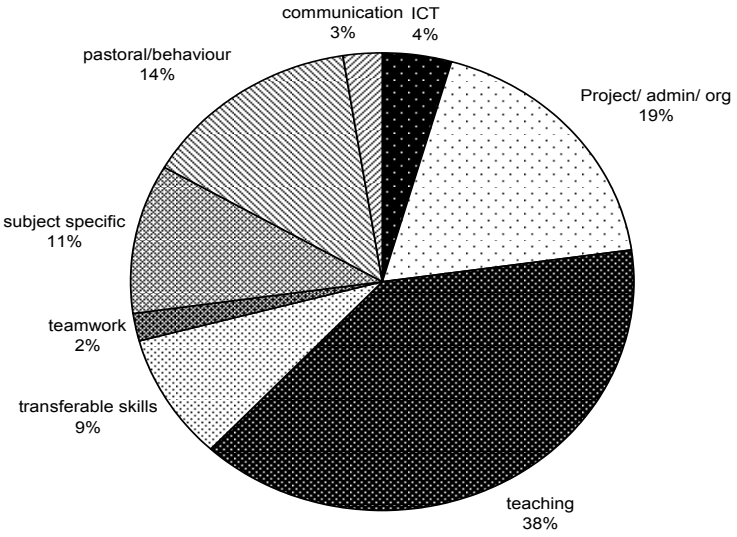


Figure 4.4: Distribution of Credits Awarded to Claimants, nos 31-58



A search undertaken on the student record databank collated all the titles of AOLs, then themes of learning were analysed (see Figure 4.5) by compiling all the titles of AOLs from all undergraduate claims identified during 2004-05, totalling 58 claimants. Figures 4.3 and 4.4 show the distribution of credits at levels 1-4, with the majority at levels 1-3. These range from a minimum of 20 credits at level 1 to a maximum of 340 credits spread over all 3 levels for one individual. As can be seen, level 1 credits are predominant and amounts range from 20-170. One claimant had been awarded L4 credits which, although these are undergraduate claims, demonstrates that claimants have extensive learning. These AOLs from all undergraduate claims were then analysed by title and grouped into similar themes, then summarised in Figure 4.5 below demonstrating eight themes of AOLs, but showing a wide spread of different topic areas.

Figure 4.5: Themes of AOLs in Percentages



This gives some indication of the range of subject areas presented in a claim and where the predominant credit amounts were awarded. It was not possible to analyse the content of the claims, as only the computerised record of titles was available, therefore possibly not accurately reflecting the content, but subject themes that

claimants used in their RAL claims were suggested and result in emergent themes of learning that contribute to current WBL.

1. **ICT** (n = 15) - this was related from a range of basic computer skills, such as word processing and presentation, to teaching ICT and web design.

2. **Projects and administration** (n = 43) - included a variety of administrative tasks ranging from managing projects, to organisation of office procedures or of work teams and activities.

3. **Teaching/education** (n = 41) - by far the largest component. As well as those teaching assistants and overseas trained teachers (of which there were a number), there were a number of claims that included categories such as 'peer mentoring' which came from non-teachers who made a claim for teaching gaining a smaller amount of points awarded for the area. The teachers were likely to have a range of teaching-related activities included within their claim, such as supporting learning needs, assessment and supporting the curriculum. This supports Eraut's (1994) claim that as professionals gain experience in their field they tend to move into either teaching or management of their chosen profession. Inclusion in RAL indicates they recognise it as being a valuable component of their work role.

4. **Transferable skills** (n = 41) - a university compulsory requirement at level 1, and the majority of, but not all, claimants included this category. Transferable skills must be undertaken by all students in the university, so there should be similar numbers of transferable skill claims as there are claimants. However, claimants that have 120 credits at Level 1 in certificated learning are exempted and are therefore not included in the RAL claim. This is particularly likely for nurses whose initial pre-qualifying education is rated at 120 credits at level 1. Each transferable skills claim is only awarded 20 credits at level 1, because that equates to the university module which is the only module that must be a matched claim.

5. **Teamwork** (n = 9) - included AOLs such as working in teams and collaborative activities with other colleagues.

6. **Subject specific** (n = 33) - this was assigned to categories that were specialist to the claimant and related to some specific professional or occupational knowledge required for their work. For example, nurses put in claims for advanced nursing skills, but other categories (such as choreography or a driving diploma) fell into this group.

7. **Pastoral/behaviour** (n = 26) - arose mainly from the teaching categories, but included aspects such as managing challenging behaviour, counselling, dealing with bullying or raising cultural and ethnic awareness. These were grouped together, as they appeared to create a theme of providing care and an environment in which others can function, perhaps by enabling learning, or by supporting others through a life event.

8. **Communication** (n = 8) - this was the final category, and one which included linguistics and teaching. It was also a theme within the transferable skills and therefore unsurprising that some claimants chose to make it a specific AOL in order to recognise special skills and abilities.

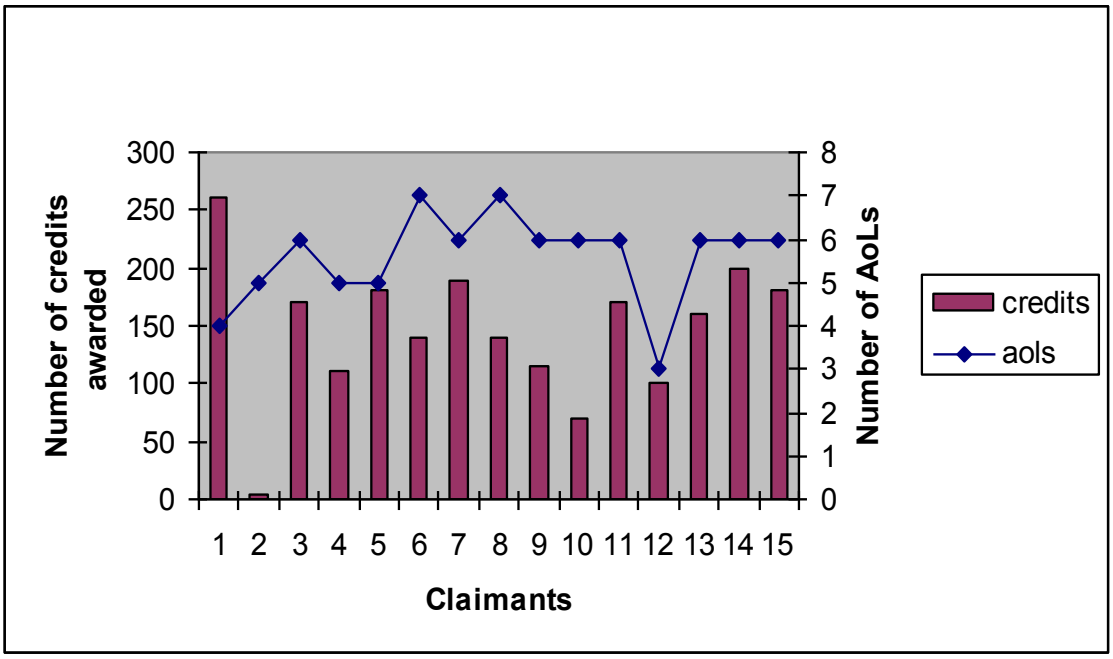
These themes of learning, although diverse, reflected claimants' work roles and also reflect other categories of transferable skills, such as ICT and teamwork. They also demonstrated that these skills were required at work and therefore were not only represented in what employers wanted, but also were the skills that were actually generated from work.

Question 5: "*How many credits were you awarded for your RAL claim?*"

Figure 4.6 demonstrates that the amount of credit awarded in relation to the number of AOLs seems to have very little correlation to the amount of credit awarded. For example, claimant 1 has submitted four AOLs and gained over 260 credits, but claimant 2 submitted five AOLs and was awarded less than 50 credits, and claimant 10 submitted six AOLs, but received less than 100 credits. This amply demonstrates

the lack of relationship between volumes of credit to number of AOLs, and therefore clearly indicates the need for transparent guidance to justify assessment decisions.

Figure 4.6: Amount of Credit Awarded in Relation to Numbers of AOLs



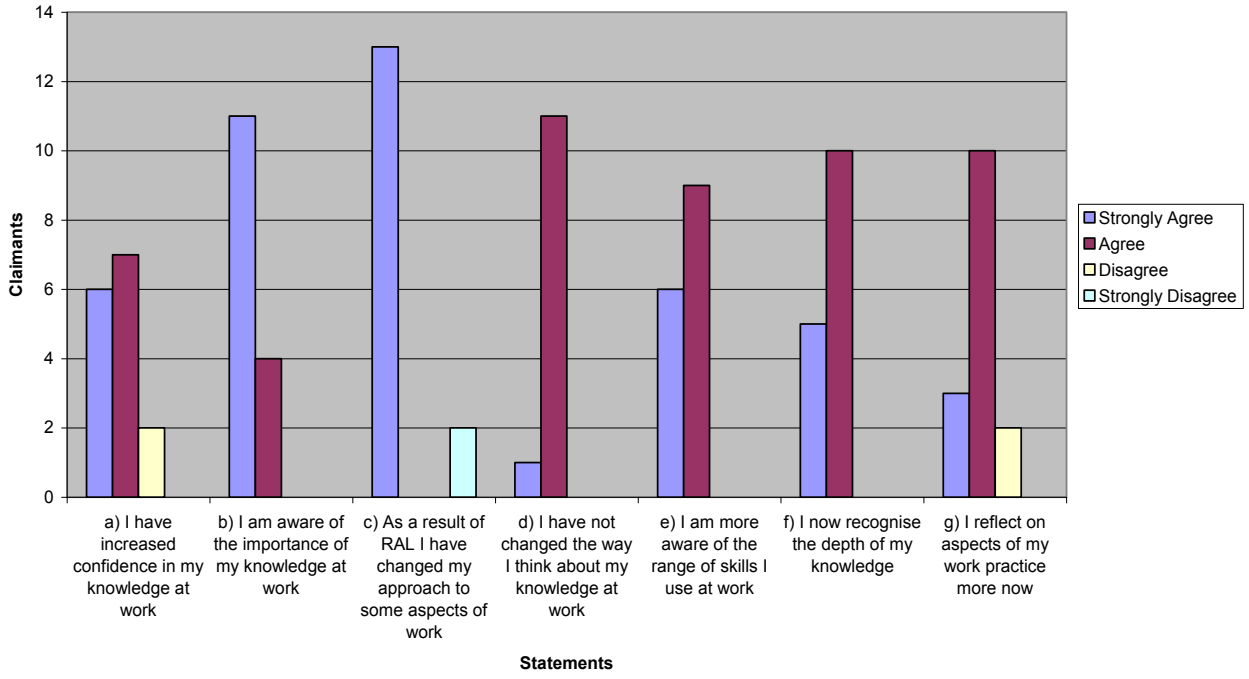
Question 6: "*Ways in which the RAL process has affected work and personal learning*"

This question was designed to support anecdotal claims that undertaking an accreditation claim positively affects a claimant's confidence in their own abilities and helps them to value work knowledge. These responses indicate that there was strong agreement to statements that emphasise the increase of confidence (6a) and recognition of one's own capabilities at work (6b) and recognition that the process of RAL had changed the way that individuals have recognised their learning from work (6d). There was an increase of awareness of the skills required at and gained through work (6e) and a greater awareness of the depth and importance of knowledge gained from work (6b and 6f).

There also appears to be an increase in the amount of conscious reflection upon work (6g). It will be noted that there was a minority of respondents who consistently disagreed with the statements about changes as a result of RAL. Some, though not all, of these can be attributed to two respondents who had been disappointed with their RAL results and had withdrawn from the programme after the first module as they felt dissatisfied with their awarded credits. It is important for programme sponsors,

purchasers and academics to remember that not all students find this method of study successful and, especially being mature students, may find it discouraging not to achieve their expectations. In the case of these two respondents, their feedback indicated that easier access to their tutor and to the web-based learning environment, with additional examples of what was expected, may have helped them overcome their difficulties earlier and enabled them to succeed as they had been expecting.

Figure 4.7: "Ways in Which the RAL Process Affected Work and Personal Learning"

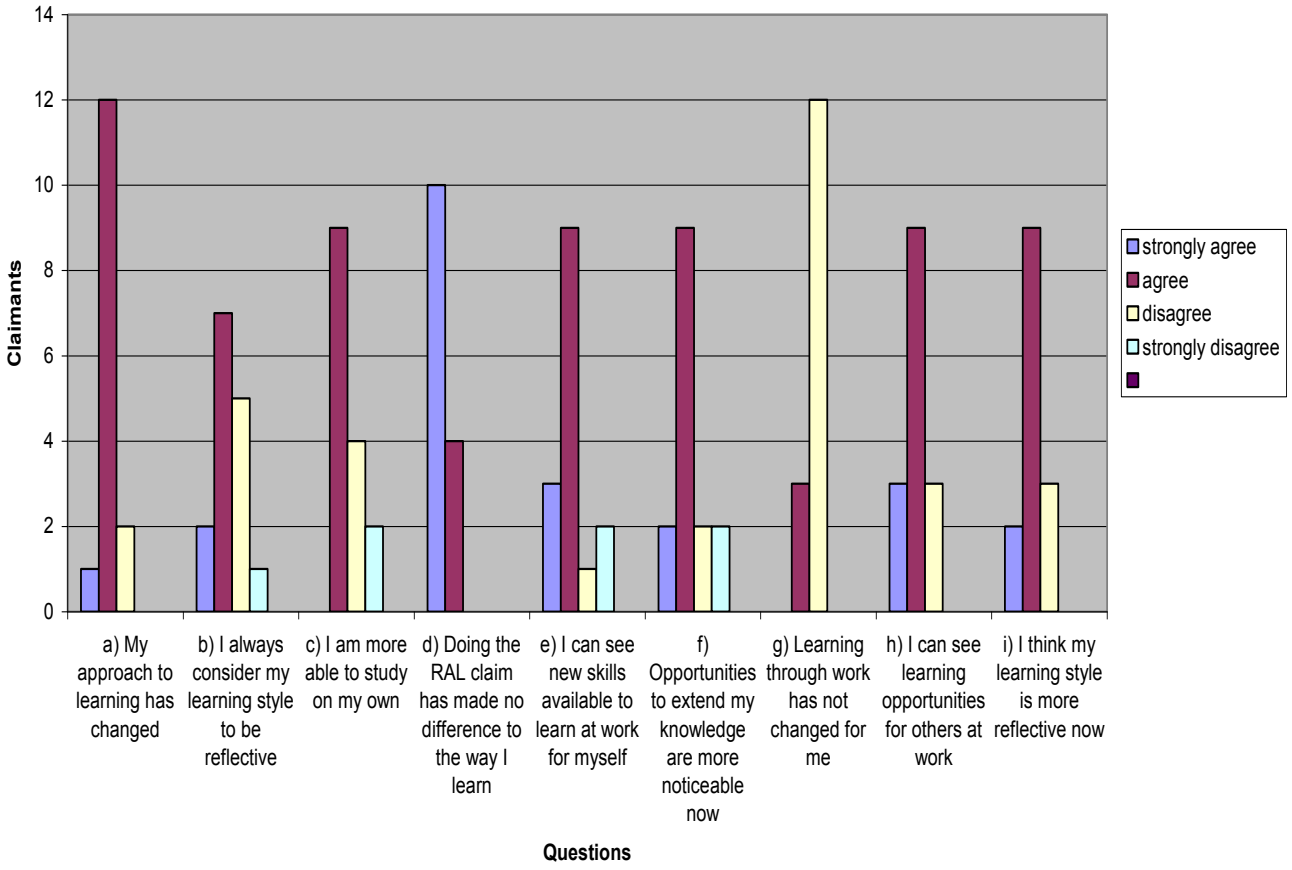


Question 7: "*Ways approaches to learning have been affected by the RAL module*"

The most remarkable response to this question was agreement that the approach to learning has changed and become more reflective (7a, 7d, 7g, 7i), and this would have been an interesting question to follow up with further qualitative comments and enquire how the respondents considered it had changed. Unfortunately, due to a lack of time and opportunity this was not possible here, but it may be something to be pursued in the future. There are indications that respondents had become more autonomous as learners (7c) and that they were more able to make use of learning

opportunities that arose *ad hoc* (7e, 7f), both for themselves and others (7h). 7d is the one answer that seems to be strongly negative, but indicates a change in how learning at work is perceived.

Figure 4.8: Ways that Approaches to Learning have been Affected by Undertaking RAL



Question 8: "*Can you give an example of recognising a learning opportunity at work which you might not have previously recognised?"*

There were 13 responses, of which two were 'no'. Other answers were positive and demonstrated a heightened awareness of learning: *"It is not so much about recognising a learning opportunity in itself, but being more aware of your own work"*. Evidence that learning from the RAL experience is perpetuated following

completion of the module comes in another example: "*Using my diary… has really impressed me at the moment"*.

Question 9: "*How much did each of these activities help you to identify learning?*"

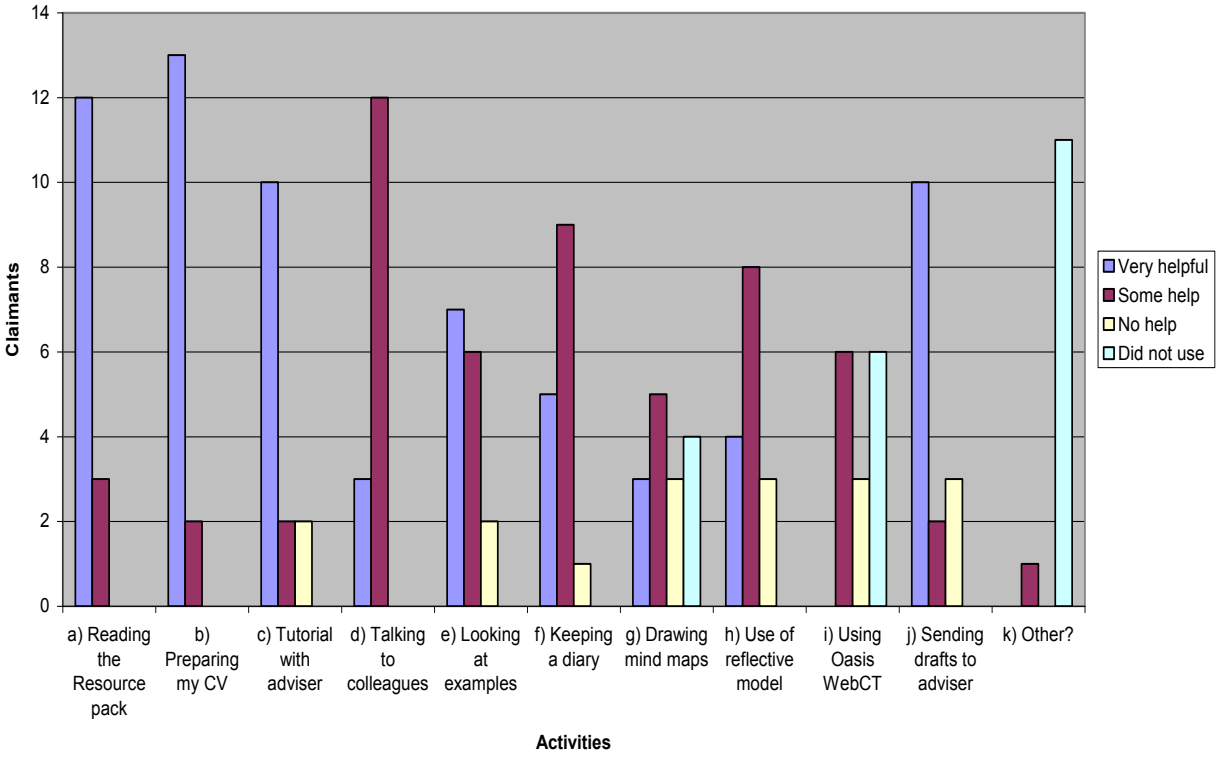
The claimants responded as to how a variety of teaching activities used in RAL helped them during the module.

Claimants found preparing the CV (9b), followed by reading the resource pack as most helpful to finding AOLs. Academic assistance is also deemed helpful (9c, 9j), as well as looking at examples (9e), but colleagues (9d) and keeping a diary also helped (9f), so allowing time for reflection and recording of actual activities that might otherwise be overlooked. The use of on-line strategies such as a VLE was not popular and few claimants tried to access it. Therefore, academics should consider the use of learning activities to ensure they maximise opportunities for constructive feedback and academic support.

Question 10: "*Any other activities used to uncover learning?"*

There were nine responses, three being 'no', but the others indicated that reflection and analysis by reading old documents, talking to others and undertaking a personal development plan with a manager helped to reveal learning. Some claimants stated that reviewing and revising each AOL helped them. This supports the module guidance which suggests that drafting work and amending it in the light of academic feedback is a constructive learning exercise.

Figure 4.9: Activities Used to Help Identify Learning



Question 11: "***What aspects of RAL did you find difficult?"***

Six out of 13 responses indicated that it was academic skills such as understanding academic language and developing analytical skills, and two claimants stated that getting feedback from their adviser was a problem, seemingly receiving conflicting advice. Practical issues (such as time management) were noted by three claimants. These statements indicate that introducing claimants to the world of academia requires learning activities that enable them to understand the requirements of the programme and the academic language. Peters (2004) also noted that the academic language was perceived by students as a barrier to making an APEL claim. Eight out of 15 claimants used strategies of reflection, analysis and breaking the work into manageable size pieces to uncover their learning. Four claimants did not feel that they had managed to overcome the difficulties, with two complaining about their academic support.

Question 12: "*What sort of on-line support activities would be helpful?*"

Four out of nine responses suggested actual activities such as use of terminology, looking at examples, and gaining feedback from others or an adviser. Two others stated that they were satisfied with their academic support alone, but another was not able to access or use the on-line support, and another stated that she had no interest in using learning by computer as she had not been brought up with it. This probably reflects the typical age range of the part-time mature students attracted to WBL, as not all working adults are comfortable with ICT.

Question 13: "*Have you changed your job since completing RAL?"*

Three out of 15 claimants had changed their job since doing a RAL claim. Anecdotally, it has been asserted that it is quite common for claimants to change jobs shortly after starting the WBL programme, not least because the RAL process empowers them by recognising and valuing their skills and abilities. It would be interesting to follow this cohort on completion of their degrees, and see how many had changed jobs during or soon after completing their studies, and if they attributed it to the qualification as being work based, or just because it recognised and awarded academic ability.

Question 14: "*Any other comments?"*

Twelve out of 15 claimants commented; two of which were the complaints regarding a poor learning experience. The others however, were positive. Comments such as "*Enjoyable but hard work"* were made and an appreciation of its impact on their future, as in "*It helped me plan for future development, identifying further areas to develop and skills to improve and therefore made my appraisal easier"*, thus recognising that they had started a continuing development of self, which resonates with the assertion of Warner Weil and McGill (1989) that the fourth village of experiential learning changes the self through reflective learning. For example one claimant stated that:

> *"I think it's a fantastic opportunity to gain accreditation for prior learning. The structure of the ... course is perfect to help adults recognise prior learning and benefit through the process. Great encouragement for lifelong learning"*

and another said:

> *"It enabled me to see learning through work is very important and no knowledge is ever wasted"*

which was endorsed by another:

> *"...it made me aware of how many different skills I have acquired during my working life".*

The need for APEL to be available elsewhere in the university, so that claimants could become aware of it through other programmes, was suggested.

Reflective essays

All claimants invited to participate in the survey were also asked to send an electronic copy of either a reflective essay or an AOL, with signed permission that it could be used for research and teaching purposes. The eight reflective essays that were received had been submitted as part of the assessment process of the RAL module. The claimants were required to reflect upon the process of compiling their claim and what it meant for them. The RAL resource pack includes a series of questions to help write and focus the essay, and therefore there will be certain themes expressed within the essays already in order to meet the assessment criteria. This part of the research was to explore the impact that RAL had upon claimants' work and learning, so it was decided to analyse themes within the essays for indications of what the claimants had learnt and experienced during the RAL process.

The essays were analysed by seeking themes in relation to the impact of RAL upon each claimant's personal and professional work. Analysis of the essays identified words or phrases that described impact upon the claimants personally or professionally, and these were then grouped into different themes related to the core (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The following six themes emerged:

1. Impact on work role.
2. Professional practice and impact upon their profession.
3. Impact upon self as a person.

4. Professional development.
5. Personal development.
6. Student experience of the RAL process.

These themes derived partly from the reflective essay requirements, but each claimant emphasises a particular aspect relevant to their own experience and personalises it, so that for some the impact was clearly personal (for example, in relation to career and self-esteem) while for others the emphasis was more concerned about themselves as a professional.

1. Impact on work role:

The process of undertaking a RAL claim seemed to make claimants question their current job role, but also to find interest in extending their role and learning new skills:

> *"I have discovered that I am no longer content with this type of job function such as being a secretary, which in the main is comprised of listening, taking dictation and during the past few years, a purely administrative role. I have found that my approach to work has changed in that I enjoy being creative but… wish to develop my skills further".*

Undergoing the procedural aspects of the claim, such as making a claim for transferable skills, demonstrates how these students were able to meet the learning outcomes through their work practices:

> *"Claiming for transferable skills has enabled me to reflect on various areas which I used daily in carrying out my daily work which I never thought counts for much".*

2. Professional practice:

Whilst many of these students did not have professional qualifications (as they were undergraduates), they could be considered as learning their profession through work. It was apparent that a number of them practised their work in a professional manner, or in a way that reflected the professionals that they worked with:

"…although I knew I was a good teacher, I now know why. It is because I have high expectations of myself and the pupils… I always teach in a non-judgemental way, respond positively to the pupils in all situations and that I am capable of making a difference".

The opportunity to reflect upon, document and evidence their practice enabled some to see how they presented themselves as an aspiring professional:

"The development of the portfolio and my reflection has positively influenced and encouraged the way I view myself, my role and my career aspirations".

If they were in any doubt about the impact they have upon others, this extract was typical of the astonishment that some expressed when affirmed by others:

"To 'prove' the claim, to try to analyse the effect as I have as a practitioner, it made sense to ask the people most affected: colleagues, team members, patients. The surprise was in the wholehearted response and the affirmation of my worth".

3. Impact upon self as a person:

There was a feeling expressed by several claimants that doing the module was not just for recognition of their work, but also for themselves as a person in recognition of who and what they were and had achieved:

"I want this module to give me the recognition I deserve for the job that I do but, probably more importantly, it will be for self-recognition… as for my aspirations…I discovered a confidence in myself that I liked…"

Several considered that their self-confidence had improved through the RAL process, even going so far for one claimant to state:

"The module so far has had notable influence on me and made me think, act and behave in a different way".

In my experience, these comments are not unusual to find in the RAL reflective essays, and they support the assertions made in the literature about reflection leading to 'transformative learning' (Mezirow, 1991), and that experiential learning is concerned with personal growth and development (Warner Weil and McGill, 1989).

4. Professional development:

Doing the module seemed to crystallise future aspirations for several claimants, especially in relation to their chosen careers:

> *"From this module I have also realised exactly where I want to go with my career".*

The opportunity to undertake degree level study was, for some, a fulfilment of an ambition, whilst also recognising areas for future potential development:

> *"As a fulfilment of a lifetime dream and especially for achieving further self-development… at the same time I will further develop my skills in software design and research".*

There was recognition that much of their work was routine and mundane and yet there were opportunities to develop problem-solving and critical appraisal skills which were expected of the professional degree level worker:

> *"I noticed that a lot of my present work is having to think on my feet, very challenging and requires a lot of concentration. Some aspects are very monotonous but I am learning daily how to improve various aspects of it professionally".*

5. Personal development:

As identified previously, for some, studying for a degree is the fulfilment of a dream, and one which they had previously not considered as being possible, though they were able to recognise their own skills and motivations. However, the opportunity to prove their personal capabilities and gain a new self-confidence from work, coupled with having their experience recognised as valid, was a personal achievement:

> *"At 16 I left school with only a few qualifications. As a result, all through my working life I have felt the need to try harder due to my lack of academic qualifications and the lack of confidence from a job".*

The success of personal achievement was coupled with an awareness that they were undertaking something that was profoundly different to anything they had previously experienced:

> *"I am venturing out of my comfort zone in respect that I am aware of my academic level in the subjects that I know and am familiar with. I appreciate and am aware that this work based learning is on a different dimension and look forward to challenging my boundaries and perceived learning concepts".*

As the RAL module started with reflection upon the claimant's own achievements, it seems to have had a profound impact upon the claimant as an individual and the opening up of new vistas and possibilities:

> *"I also have to consider all the new skills and self-awareness that I have already gained in this module, such as the new ways of learning, the way in which my current working role will be redefined, the realisation of the need to explore and expand in new areas of learning, the personal development and my career aspirations".*

This again reflects Warner Weil and McGill's (1989) fourth village of experiential learning and of transformational learning resulting in personal change.

6. Student experience of the RAL process:

The impact that academics have upon the learning experience is clearly identified here, as the claimants sought feedback, developed their learning and received reassurance that their work was on the right lines. Affirmation of the claimant as a knowledgeable person in his/her own field, acceptance of the claimant's experience as having value and credibility as in an andragogical learning approach (Knowles *et al*., 2005), and being open, genuine and empathetic (Rogers, 1983) is important to establish a learning relationship with these non-traditional students. The camaraderie between fellow students that helped to motivate claimants must also not be underestimated:

> *"My tutor was complementary in his comments and I felt this was the boost I needed to get me motivated and enthused… my work ratio… became more consistent because I now had the confidence that I was on the right track… through talking with my colleague about this module, it became an exercise of sharing our concerns and enjoying each others success at completing a piece of work".*

The importance of asking questions to provoke critical thinking skills and to develop reflective capabilities is also a key activity to assisting learning from experience (Brookfield, 1987):

> *"I found the feedback to be more questions than answers. On reflection I feel this was mainly to make me more independent and also to make me think of possible ways of expanding my work… after reading other learners' work I can see how looking at others can also help yourself, it helps you ask questions…".*

It was recognised too, that there were academic skills that had to be acquired during this module, particularly of academic terminology to assist the claimant to understand the new world of academia:

> *"I expect to have gained a better understanding of the academic approaches regarding terminology".*

Academic language and terminology as a barrier to accessing university level education should not be underestimated, and has been found in APEL elsewhere (Peters, 2004). This suggests that to facilitate transition from worker to learner, academic terminology needs translation. Academic assumptions regarding terminology should be challenged and support provided for claimants using learning activities and glossaries at appropriate junctures.

The time and commitment required to compile a claim can be underestimated by both claimants and facilitators. It is assumed that because the learning and knowledge is generated from the workplace, then much of the claim process can be undertaken in the workplace, and time out for studies and reflection is not going to be time consuming. The reality is different, especially when the claimant starts to explore their learning and begins to develop their claim:

> *"…my initial expectations… were underestimated, with an expectation that WBL would not need as much time as a regular module… the amount of work was much larger than I originally anticipated, but I have to admit, it also gave me a buzz… I realised how I wanted to continue learning but needed to look at making reflection and learning part of my routine…".*

There was recognition that reflection as a valuable learning tool could also be quite unsettling for some:

> *"When reflecting on why this was so unsettling, I realised that the last time I had to unpick so much personal baggage to be examined by a third party was when I was divorced ten years ago".*

Learners often struggle to overcome the difference between 'doing' and 'learning' when writing a claim, and this was illustrated by a strategy that an individual used to prove the learning that had occurred:

> *"I methodically cut out learning experiences that I knew I couldn't evidence. I found it challenging having to differentiate between how I know what to do and then to analyse how I learnt it".*

Being able to use evidence effectively to support a RAL claim is a skill that has to be acquired through this module, and may not be used again in the programme, although skills of discernment and criticality are encountered at this stage.

The completion of the questionnaire and analysis of the reflective essays concluded the first phase of the action research data collection and generated more data in electronic format from claimants for further exploration of the RAL process.

Reflect 1.

Administering the questionnaire

On reflection, regarding the process of administering the questionnaire, I realised that on sending the initial letter and questionnaire I had not used headed paper or used the

name of a staff member that all the students would have immediately recognised, which would have improved the validity of the request to contribute to the survey, and that these simple measures would probably have increased the response rate significantly (Robson, 2002). I attempted to redress this when sending the reminder letter, by using headed paper and including the name of an administrator who was more likely to be known to the participants through her role in the NCWBLP, and I did receive additional responses.

Claimant experiences

An unexpected outcome of the questionnaire was that a student contacted me directly, as invited to on the letter of invitation to join the study. Both herself and a colleague had undertaken the RAL module, but had since been disappointed with the type of feedback and the limited amount of credit they were awarded, and wanted to know if they could still contribute to the survey. I replied positively with the comment that we could not change or improve things without feedback, and soon after received two questionnaires, both accompanied by a statement, which was a complaint about their academic adviser and the disappointment they felt with not gaining the credits they thought they were due. I was in a quandary; the receipt of such information was upsetting to me as an advocate of the programme and a professional disappointment that they perceived that they had received poor academic advice. Eventually I found a route to progress the complaint through and, whilst keeping a copy of the comments for my records and making it anonymous, I passed them on through the appropriate channels. This is a clear example of how the insider researcher's investigation into practice can uncover issues that the researcher herself is not in a position to deal with, possibly due to the position of authority in relation to other colleagues (Fraser, 1997). It also raised the conflict of role duality (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005) where, as a researcher, the complaint was not really part of the data, but as a practitioner in a CEWBL I was expected to represent excellence in teaching and learning strategies, and this did not fit into that category, placing me in a quandary.

Although an 'expert' in WBL, by designation of my job role, I had no authority to progress or rectify problems that the students had complained about. It had raised an ethical issue of potential inadequate practice by a colleague (Smyth and Holian, 1999), highlighting the limitations within which I was working and researching and

the inability to address the issues directly. It was one of those moments when one begins to realise that a job role has boundaries which are not immediately apparent on initial appointment and which are not usually important during routine work activities. Reflecting on this incident during several subsequent stages of the project enabled me to understand more about colleagues' behaviour in general, and my later frustrations regarding initiating changes in practice. As Smyth and Holian (1999) note, the insider researcher has a past, current and expected future role in the organisation which means working relationships, power and authority become part of the research activity, and which may include aspects such as questioning others' professional practice whilst trying to retain personal and professional integrity and confidentiality.

Analysing reflective essays

Analysis of the reflective essays was intriguing. As an academic assessing them, I was aware that they demonstrated the impact of RAL on work practices, some more effectively than others. The analysis of the essays was expedited by the help of a research assistant who coded the themes that I had highlighted, using the NVivo tool, which sorted the data automatically into the previously identified themes and gave me specific examples from each category to draw together. Previously, I had read several other reflective essays with another colleague and begun to identify some of these themes in them, reflecting the assessment task required of the claimants, and this demonstrated consistency in the analytical approach. Perhaps the most interesting were the two essays from the two claimants who had made a complaint about their academic support. In their essays they had been positive about the module experience, but on not receiving the amount of credit hoped for, they became negative and disappointed, and there was distinct dissonance between their reflective essays and their later statements. These have obvious implications for the academic facilitating learning in the RAL module in relation to expectations of credit award and academic support, which will be considered more fully in Chapter Five.

Feedback, coupled with reflections upon data in the work situation quite some time later, enabled me to reframe the findings from the questionnaire by collating it all into a presentation to colleagues at a subject group meeting, as part of development discussions on the VLE. Student representatives were invited to attend the presentation to consult the student voice. One student representative attended and

made some useful comments, particularly in relation to academic jargon, which were incorporated into the data as notes from the presentation. What was perhaps more remarkable as an outcome of this feedback were the resultant academic discussions around the practice and processes of the module, which resulted in a further meeting about the processes, procedures, customs and practices in relation to the RAL module. This had not been planned as part of the project, but it was an opportunity to review current practice and meant I had awakened colleagues' interest in the way learning is facilitated during this module. This outcome is followed up in the development of teaching resources in cycle 4.

Learning log

The learning log was started at the programme planning stage, partly as a way to form my ideas and capture my thoughts as they progressed, but also at times to record relevant reading, thoughts and questions (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002). The learning log was intended to be kept regularly, but as the project tended to grow in fits and starts depending on the time available to progress each stage, it was not written regularly, but did record times when I had been project active, such as interviewing or reflecting on data and then I would enter a progress report, recording key activities, thoughts and ways forward. However, I did go back on occasions and reread it in order to reflect further on incidents and activities. Occasionally I used it as a record of reading, particularly around the role of the insider researcher, when I needed to capture thoughts that had been triggered from reading relevant literature. It was helpful to return to it on occasions over a period of time, especially when things happened that a year later I had forgotten about, but which explained why I had taken certain decisions. Maintaining a learning log is considered to be crucial to developing reflexivity during the project process (Fox *et al*., 2007) and provides an opportunity to identify assumptions as well as providing an audit trail of data (Robson, 2002) in order to strengthen validity, although as noted by Herr and Anderson (2005), the use of other data can also confirm validity in a variety of ways and therefore it reduces the reliance on a learning log. This is fortunate, as a computer malfunction some time later completely eradicated all of it, and I had to rely on memory and handwritten notes.

Cycle 2

This cycle revolved around the distribution of AOLs for double blind assessment by colleagues, and the generation of initial assessment criteria from taped semi-structured interviews with academics for further development in the next cycle. These activities were to meet the project objective to explore the skills and techniques used by facilitators and assessors of the RAL module.

Plan 2

Distribution of AOLs

Eight AOLs, all of which were anonymised, were shared amongst ten academics, with the aim of each AOL being assessed by two academics to introduce objectivity into the RAL claim assessment. A list of questions (see Appendix 4) was provided to guide the assessment and prepare colleagues for a semi-structured interview, for which I also booked a date, so that momentum was not lost and the assessors knew they would have to respond quickly and therefore would be less likely to lose them or forget to respond. The purpose of this assessment activity was for the assessor to identify evidence of learning within the examples and to facilitate identification of learning characteristics and statements within the text that had helped them make a judgement about the level and amount of credit for each one. It was my intention to get them to 'think aloud' (Price, 2005) their assessment practice and to capture their tacit knowledge to make their expertise and knowledge of APEL assessment, which has developed over a significant period of time, explicit and shared within a wider arena of practice.

The academics were listed as A, B, C, etc to protect their identity, as within a small team it can be very easy to give away distinguishing personal features unwittingly thereby attaching significant meaning to data. Seven of the eight examples were returned, but only three had been assessed by two individuals. Each AOL has been recorded by its title and the pseudonym of the claimant (Table 4.1). All the returned AOLs were also assessed by myself, which included reviewing the comments and indications of learning as identified by the academic assessors.

This planning stage included the creation of a sheet to assess the first draft assessment criteria during an assessment period.

Act 2

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted during this action stage of the cycle. The interviews were spread over a three month period to fit around other staff commitments. They were usually conducted in a quiet office at a work location, and all were tape recorded. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on each respondent's experiences. It started with a review of the AOLs that they had been given, and then explored how they identified the learning and how they had come to the amount of credits that had been awarded. They also gave feedback on the quality of the examples and any difficulties they found with making the assessment. One frequent comment concerned making a judgement without the contextual information or a claimant's supporting evidence. Certainly, where claimants had included aspects of contextual information or evidence within the text illustrating their learning within the AOL itself, there was more positive feedback from the assessors.

Four of the ten assessors had not looked at the AOLs they had been given or had lost them, and another had only looked at one. Two others assessed after the interview, so this made it difficult to get the exact assessment they had made on an individual example to discuss at interview. However, as they all had wide experience of assessing AOLs they were able to draw on a range of past experience to inform the discussion.

Identification of assessment criteria from oral data

Having undertaken all the interviews myself I was able to identify assessment criteria from the oral data immediately after the interviews, which was particularly helpful as I did not have time to transcribe them immediately. Bowling (2002) calls this approach a rapid appraisal technique, in order to make a swift assessment of local views and perceptions, and is usually based on interviews of key people and local data. A number of themes emerged from listening to the interviews, which were collated and became draft criteria (see Appendix 5) in time for the summer assessment period so that staff could report back on them, allowing the data from this cycle to be used in the next. The interviews were transcribed much later, generating data for the next cycle.

Assessing AOLs

Analysis of each AOL from the assessors was then undertaken. I read copies independently and assessed them in terms of evidence of learning without looking to see what other assessors had awarded. I also tracked back to the original credit award for each one as awarded through the official assessment board. This proved to be quite difficult, but having limited numbers of respondents made it much easier to trace the origins of each AOL.

Researcher as respondent

During the interview process I found I had to strive not to interrupt or offer any comments, or lead colleagues into making particular statements and I realised that I needed to become a respondent and directly contribute to the data. By doing this I would be able to add my knowledge to the research, without influencing the contributions of others. I therefore taped myself, using the interview prompts just as if I had been a respondent. This captured my experience and reduced the frustration I felt when interviewing others. It also made me reflect on my practice and what I actually did to facilitate others. Having had experience at leading the RAL module in the HSSc, my expertise could also contribute to the data.

Evaluation of draft criteria

Having identified assessment criteria orally, an evaluation sheet was created based on these oral criteria (see Appendix 5) to see which criteria were actually being used and whether any amounts of credit were attached to any specific component. I asked five academics who were commonly involved with actual undergraduate assessment to use a draft evaluation form against at least one complete portfolio and to feedback at the end of the assessment period. Two assessors were able to do several evaluation forms, which allowed the application of findings to a wider number of accreditation portfolios, and three others did at least one for me. On receipt of these we discussed them together so that I could see what the difficulties were, and whether additional factors or amendments needed to be included in the assessment criteria.

Observe 2

Assessing and comparing AOLs

Analysis of the AOL examples and assessors' comments on them occurred quite some time after the interviews and after initial development of assessment criteria from oral data. This enabled better planning of my work schedule when other things were not pressing and I could read and reflect upon the comments and the outcomes, as well as listen to the interview tapes with the discussions with each assessor. Personally assessing each example and making my own comments and credit assessment, without reading the other assessors' comments or findings was a useful quality control mechanism, and I drew on my experience as an external examiner which enabled me to look for fairness, parity between academic levels and amounts of credit, objective assessment, and appropriate evidence from which to form a judgement, together with explicit examples of wording or themes that could be annotated and later used as examples. The analysis included identification of content describing the process of learning, or where there was potential to elaborate upon a claim to improve it. Where assessor comments suggested ways to improve the claim, or identified text that suggested it could be explored further, these were noted and compiled to contribute to general guidance on maximising credit from a claim. Some assessors were quite vehement initially in stating that a true assessment was going to be very difficult without the evidence or CV, but they did assess with the caveat that had evidence or context been present, their judgement might have been different.

Table 4.1 below demonstrates the credit awarded to each AOL when it went through the accreditation board, the amount the assessors gave it and the amount I would have given it if acting as a moderator of assessment. Where there was no second assessor the section is blank.

Table 4.1: Credits Awarded by Assessors and Assessment Board

Claimant and Titles of AOLs	Assessors	Credit recommended by Assessor 1	Credit recommended by Assessor 2	My recommended Credit award	Credits actually awarded at assessment
1. Rosy: writing & publishing	B	10 @ 1		10 @ 1	20 @ 1 10 @ 2
2. Sally: fostering & children	C and D	20 @ L1 20 @ L2 10 @ L3	20-30 @ L1	20 @ 1 20 @ 2	20 @ 1 20 @ 2
3. Caroline:	F	20 @ 1		20 @ 1	20 @ 1

training				10 @ 2	20 @ 2
4. Harry: health & safety	B and A	10 @ 1 10 @ 2	20 @ 4	10 @ 1 10 @ 2	30 @ 3
5. Jane: literacy & numeracy	E and A	10 @ 1	20 @ 1	10- 15 @ 1	10 @ 1
6. Karen: dealing with conflict in school	E	20 @ 3 10 @ 4		10-20 @ 3	10 @ 1 10 @ 2
8. Delia: teaching English as a foreign language	G	0		20@ 1 20@ 2	20 @ 2

Inconsistency of assessment

Of the four assessments[7] that had the same amount of credits awarded by more than one of the assessors, only two of those were the same as the actual credits that were awarded at the accreditation panel (entries in red text in Table 4.1). Of greater concern are the claims that were awarded credit at a significantly higher level, or credit at a much lower level, indicating that interpretation of the level descriptors is applied inconsistently by academics (in blue text). These findings have huge implications for quality assurance mechanisms and moderation procedures, and indicate not only how subjective assessment can be, but also how much variance there is in assessment of levels which is an area where, anecdotally, most staff feel confident in assessment, whereas credit volume assessment is also clearly inconsistent, which is to be expected without some kind of criteria to follow, thus further supporting a rationale for some kind of standardisation of credit volume assessment. It also suggests that moderation may need to be undertaken over a larger sample of assignments than the current practice of 10%, to encourage greater consistency across assessors.

Qualitative comments from this assessment process included identification of learning within claims, with observations, queries and comments from assessors on the texts of claims. These reflected comments that might be made to a student on receipt of draft work, so that aspects such as structure, evidence or requests for further elaboration were identified beside the text. Some assessors also indicated what could be addressed

[7] 'Rosy', 'Harry', 'Jane' and 'Sally'. All eight claimants are personalised but identities protected.

in order to improve the claim. For example, feedback for 'Rosy' identified that additional credit might be possible if it had considered:

- how and why tasks are done;
- evidence of evaluation of alternatives;
- managing relationships;
- print design consultancy;
- more analysis and discussion; and
- transference to other contexts.

This indicates additional ways that the AOL could have been developed, and demonstrates that experienced academics are able to see learning potential within a claim and make practical suggestions for improvement. In practice, access to more than one academic is usually not feasible, but with the right tools to guide the development of AOLs and assistance in asking the right questions, the claimants themselves may be equipped with improved skills of critical appraisal.

Some comments indicated credit volume criteria, such as length of time in the job role or application in a variety of contexts, although these were limited as they were explored further in the academics' interviews that followed. Assessment of claims without supporting evidence and contextual information from a CV were noted to be difficult, as these are usually available to refer to when assessing claims, so some assessors awarded credit with the proviso "*depending on the evidence"* (that is, the individualisation of the claim). From the selection of AOLs that were presented, four were identified as having potential to be used for teaching examples. These included learning that was mentioned in passing, but not fully explored or analysed. For example, 'Harry' stated: "*I designed my own model of approach that outlines these basic elements",* but does not include the model as part of the evidence, or explain how and why this model was created, and this was noted by both assessors. These questions will be incorporated into the guidance for claimants and assessors to maximise claims and the exercises to assist claimants to identify their learning (see Appendix 9).

Several of the interviewees stated that the AOLs that they were assessing were not really good enough to be submitted for final assessment, and that their personal feedback would have suggested more work to be undertaken before submission. As these examples were all final submissions to the accreditation board this does raise concerns about the quality of submissions and the type of feedback that claimants have been receiving. This was particularly the case for 'Delia', whose assessor was very concerned that she had been wrongly and/or poorly advised, and consequently awarded no credit. Again, this has implications for staff development sessions in the future, as it suggests that some of the less experienced academics are not receiving adequate mentoring, particularly as the assessors in this study were some of the most experienced but who are no longer involved in the undergraduate programme, and therefore their expertise is not being shared with less experienced colleagues.

Reflect 2

Analysis of AOLs

The variable response rate in terms of academic feedback from the AOLs was initially disappointing and upset my plan of blind marking and comparisons between different assessors. However, real world research requires flexibility and adaptability to the available situation which cannot be manipulated to provide the perfect and exact research environment (Robson, 2002). The process did show that there were marked differences between assessors, which is not so unexpected but the inconsistencies between assessment of level is perhaps more concerning as it suggests the WBL would benefit from on-going quality monitoring during teaching and assessment periods. Not having contextual information in the form of at least a CV was considered by some to be a problem, but having had a previous experience of assessing RAL that had been separated from its evidence due to it being lost in the post, I knew that the majority of assessors can make a judgement on work even if it is not fully informed. It was also noted that no academics requested or expected integration of theoretical knowledge into their experiential learning. Confidence in an assessment decision usually develops through experience, but problematic claims may be shared with a colleague for confirmation or verification in the usual practice of assessment. This was not possible in this simulated activity, and therefore the discrepancies between collegial judgements may be more evident in this small sample than in actual practice.

Conversely, it could be considered that assessing the AOLs out of context, without supporting information, removed part of the assessors' reference points of the CV, which provides context, significance and individualisation of the AOL, thus losing its individualised approach (Armsby *et al*., 2006) and making the assessment more mechanistic. On reflection later, I considered that a useful question to have asked the assessors was in relation to the contextualisation required for a successful RAL claim. It does mean that these assessments may not fully reflect the contextual authenticity of assessment and perhaps it would have been better to have assessed an actual RAL claim during an assessment period to ensure that conditions were similar to usual practice. However, the practicalities of this during an assessment period were just not

feasible, particularly in relation to competing demands on colleagues' time and goodwill. Another important issue is that not all academics were still involved in undergraduate work and it was important to draw on the full range of experience available to contribute to the collective expert and tacit knowledge in WBL whilst it was available, and therefore this was the best option.

Identification of oral assessment criteria

Being able to generate assessment criteria from oral data using a rapid appraisal technique (Bowling, 2002) was very helpful during this cycle, as it enabled more trial time and additional opportunities to engage colleagues early on with draft criteria, thus allowing increased feedback and reframing of my ideas. The use of an evaluation sheet was helpful in trying to formulate a workable model, but demonstrated that amounts of credit were difficult to link with specific criteria, and would need much more thought and development if credits were to be designated exactly to assessment criteria. Consequently, the attribution of credit amounts depending on the number of assessment criteria used has been an area of considerable reflection and reconsideration as the project progressed. Feedback from academics indicated that the allocation of exact amounts of credit to specific criteria would set an expectation of a specific amount of credit rather than being guidelines to inform academic judgement and therefore should not be included in the guidelines for claimants.

Researcher as respondent

A significant factor in this cycle was the realisation that I was keen to contribute actively to the data. Analysing other people's contributions was not enough, as I perceived that some learning and teaching activities or models for practice were not being expressed. I did consider asking someone else to interview me, but decided that for consistency and practicality, I should interview myself. This also meant that all findings and data shared with colleagues would carry the same importance and they would not be swayed by thinking any one piece of information had come from a particular contributor. This also raised the tension of being both a practitioner and a researcher, as I was concerned with the ideas affecting my own and others' practice, and was keen to contribute to the research from my experience as a practitioner (Van Heugten, 2004).

Cycle 3

The two main activities in this cycle are the transcription of the interviews and their analysis to generate information for guidance of both claimants and academics. This contributes to the objective of creating teaching and learning resources to support facilitators of the RAL module. Initial assessment criteria were trialled through an assessment period, gaining feedback from colleagues as to ease of use and application, and were consequently refined further to achieve the objective to develop criteria for credit volume assessment within RAL claims. The recognition that external knowledge of credit volume criteria might contribute to the project through an interview with an external accreditation expert led me to seek verification and further enquiry into other possible models elsewhere.

Plan 3

Interview transcription

This cycle began with the interviews being transcribed for me. Once they were transcribed I pasted them into an NVivo software package to assist in their analysis. There was a huge amount of data to be sorted, which would take considerable time to analyse and extract the important information. To assist analysis, I had already identified themes to be extracted from the data, which were advice to claimants, volume assessment criteria and guidance for advisers. These themes were to be sought by reading the data and looking for specific content related to these subjects (Bowling, 2002). The use of NVivo simplified the identification of themes and coding of text which could then be constructed into sections of similar themes and coded, and therefore much easier to extract information. The use of computerised categorisation and analysis made the process more rigorous and structured, thus enabling a systematic approach to data analysis (Bowling, 2002).

Trialling draft criteria

The other focus of activity for this cycle was the first trial, development and retrial of the assessment criteria. This had to be planned around the summer assessment period when I introduced a draft criteria form (see Appendix 6) and explained it to colleagues in an academic group meeting, asking them to use it when assessing RAL

claims. To maximise responses and involve those academics who no longer assessed undergraduates, I asked all of the academics assessing any RAL (both postgraduate and undergraduate) to contribute. I had to be mindful of assessment demands and therefore asked if they could complete at least one form, preferably more. I arranged that the forms would be left in the portfolios when assessed and collected later with assistance from the administrative staff. The form was devised so that each student's AOL could be assessed against ten categories, with several sub-sections to each category, so that I could see what categories in particular recurred and if they related to the number of credits awarded (see Appendix 5).

Act 3

Evaluation of draft criteria

I received 22 completed forms from six different academics, each of whom had assessed a different number of claims using the form, ranging from one to eleven portfolios. Having received the forms, I then discussed them with each assessor to try to determine whether the assessment framework had helped them or not, and to clarify any written comments. During this process, a senior colleague identified a draft credit tariff that had been attempted some time ago, but had not progressed into regular use, and gave me a copy. It had a few similarities to the current criteria, although it did not take into account some factors that had been identified, and therefore it was added to the data to be analysed. A suggested outline of an AOL currently available on the VLE which was being used by an academic, and which focused on how to express different levels and quantifying training hours, was also added to the data to review later.

Qualitative comments from academics with regard to the assessment criteria were generally positive and it was apparent that each AOL usually involved at least 3-6 of the assessment criteria. I tried to calculate how many criteria were used in relation to the amount of credits awarded, but it was soon evident that there was no correlation between the two. Discussions with colleagues had also helped me refine the criteria and consider other aspects of assessment (e.g. presentation and use of evidence). Gathering all this data together enabled me to construct the next draft criteria in a

more user friendly format, together with explanations to both claimant and assessor as to how these might be used. This I circulated to all colleagues via email during September, inviting further comment and feedback and encouraging them to integrate them into RAL teaching during that semester. At the end of the semester I sent an evaluation form with the outlines of the criteria appended to them and asked for further feedback (see Appendix 7), which would contribute to the final version being prepared for introduction into the teaching materials in the following academic year. The assessment criteria could not be introduced into the second semester materials, as all the resource packs had been printed at the beginning of the academic year, but this allowed time for further amendments and integration into the teaching materials in a planned and systematic way. I had hoped to include them on the VLE during the second semester, but this proved too difficult to do as the RAL module leaders were learning to use a new VLE system and were working to familiarise themselves with it. They were reluctant to include anything new on the sites which they would then have to facilitate, particularly as my criteria were unfamiliar. Local policy requires module leaders to monitor and maintain their VLE module site, and other staff are rarely involved, therefore their cooperation was essential when introducing it.

Interview analysis

Analysis of the interviews started in the early autumn. The interviews were analysed using different themes relating to teaching, learning, assessing or facilitating RAL, and other emergent themes. The themes were first identified and coded manually, then transferred into NVivo to assist with analysis and collation. Unfortunately, the research assistant who had helped with analysis of the reflective essays was no longer in post and finding someone to assist me in this using the software was difficult. I managed to code the data and compile it into themes, but I was not able to distil the themes any further using NVivo. However, having distilled all the data into themes, it was then possible to code manually and condense them into sub-categories to focus the findings and inform the written guidance for academics and claimants. Once coded, NVivo organised them into themes, thus making it much easier to read and extract pertinent data.

Observe 3

Evaluation of assessment criteria

The draft assessment criteria had tried to record the number of credits awarded to individual AOLs and I tried to divide the number of credits awarded per AOL by the number of criteria used. Determining a specific number of credits for each criteria proved impossible, partly due to low numbers of evaluation documents and limited attention to detail by the assessors when completing the drafts, but also because the evaluation tool was not designed with that in mind and therefore was inadequate for the task. For example, often the total number of credits awarded to a person was recorded, but not all the AOLs were included on the sheet to show the breakdown of credits, therefore it was not clear how many credits were awarded per individual AOL. I decided my calculations were seriously flawed and tried several other approaches, finally deciding that academic judgement regarding the level and volume of claim should determine the outcome per AOL, rather than setting a specific credit formula. However, the information gained simplified it and made it more user friendly.

The qualitative comments from the first evaluation of the volume assessment criteria indicated that these criteria could be used to:

- facilitate peer or tutor feedback either face-to-face or via the VLE;
- provide a framework in which to make an assessment judgement;
- structure the assessment of the AOL;
- create a template for claimants to structure their RAL claims and possibly facilitate e-portfolios;
- provide coherence between first and second RAL claims;
- recognise training time within claims;
- offer benchmarks between current and former claims in the same subject area;
- encourage claimants to use learning outcomes to structure their claims;
- recognise qualitative and/or unique factors within a claim; and
- emphasise the context(s), originality or supportive evidence of the claim.

These comments demonstrate the usefulness of collaborative input from staff, not only in terms of creating the criteria, but also in their further development. It was

apparent the data was skewed due to the way individual academics chose assessment categories (Table 4.2). The number of times each criteria had been used was collated (Table 4.2) to see if there were any criteria that were irrelevant or omitted, and to calculate any relation between credits awarded and the number of criteria used. For example, criteria 7 recorded 12 uses, but only three academics used it and two of them only used it once, and another academic used it ten times. This suggests that particular assessment strategies are preferred by academics, and that changing assessment to a more objective and transparent approach may present a number of challenges and opportunities in relation to staff development. Alternatively, it may be that some types of claim may be more responsive to particular assessment strategies, but the level of experience of the assessors must also be taken into account, as those with more experience tended to use a wider range of criteria than the less experienced.

Criteria 5 in Table 4.2 is also an interesting one. Academics were concerned that claimants were not articulating all their knowledge and often made assumptions that resulted in them being awarded less credit than they needed, because they had not explicitly recorded their foundational underpinning knowledge and therefore did not have levels 1 and 2 credit awarded. It took several attempts at rewording and verbal and written feedback from colleagues to make this category more explicit within the final assessment criteria (see Appendix 8).

Table 4.2: Credit Volume Categories Used

	Credit volume guide	Number of times each criteria used
1	Recognition of incremental learning over a period of years	21
2	Acknowledgement of incremental experience in the area	21
3	Equates to similar learning **product** as for a credited module	10
4	The AOL is analysed in components that reflect or are equivalent to/ or suggest learning outcomes	20
5	Assessed using a range of credit levels that recognises underpinning knowledge/skills required to demonstrate learning at more than one level, and **may be implicit** in the claim	19

6	Assessors' awareness of total number of credits required from claim divided between AOLs to reflect overall student learning activity	5
7	Reflecting formal training/education hours; (9hrs = 1 credit, 180 hrs = 20 credits) as part of the AOL	12
8	Other categories?	4
9	Any other factors affecting your decision	5
10	Any changes to credit amount following moderation?	0

Criteria 8 and 9 were identified as factors such as originality, presentation of the claim or quality of evidence, and were identified by four of the six academics involved.

Interview data

The interview data proved to be extensive. Once the themes had been identified and collated using NVivo, they were printed and reviewed as hard copy, summarised and then condensed further. Fifteen themes emerged, varying in size. The largest by far was that of 'advisor comments', which included aspects such as teaching and learning strategies and using reflection, and the second largest was 'student guidance'. Inevitably, there were some overlaps and repetitions between categories because, for example, guidance for assessors might also be relevant for students, and so might have the same data included within both. Additionally, there were many sub-categories, and these can be seen in Appendix 12. Table 4.3 overleaf summarises the themes that emerged. The comments column indicates where the data has been used to inform products from the project, or where there are recommendations arising from the data, and these will be explored more fully in the next chapter. The majority of the products meet objectives numbers 5 and 6, as these are related to the development of teaching and learning resources for the module.

Reflect 3

Evaluation of assessment criteria

Following feedback from this evaluation, I began to term the assessment criteria 'volume descriptors' to bring some parity between them and the level descriptors, and also because I had been calling them categories which was not altogether applicable. I was mindful of the feedback about academic jargon and felt that consistency in terminology would help both academics and claimants to see them as tools with which to structure AOLs or for teaching and assessing. The supporting information that was devised to go with the volume descriptors was aimed to be non-academic, so that it was accessible for claimants just starting an academic programme.

Table 4.3: Categories From Advisor Interviews

No.	Category	Products informed by category
1	Advisor comments	• Guidance for use of volume assessment criteria (see Appendices 10 and 11). • Finding AOLs. • Level descriptors explained.
2	Student guidance	• Student guidance to finding and writing AOLs. • Claimants guide - using level and volume descriptors. • Student expectations guide.
3	Guidance for assessors	• Guidance to advisors for RAL. • Annotating CV and JD.
4	Assessment	• **Recommend: increase collaborative marking for quality purposes.** • Level descriptors explained.
5	WBL	• Information about WBL for students. • Staff development to use RAL in their programmes.
6	Transdisciplinary skills	• Recognition of skills that transfer between work practices. • Themes of AOLs.
7	Impact of RAL on students	• Transformative learning experiences. • Power of reflective learning reported.
8	Credit volume	• Volume descriptors (see Appendices 10 and 11). • Advisor guidance for RAL. • Good claims guidance in finding AOLs (see Appendix 10).
9	Level criteria	• Level descriptors in accessible language. • **Reduce jargon in learning materials .**
10	ICT	• **Recommend: invest in VLE student and staff training.** • Consider on-campus training sessions for claimants.
11	Learning	• Finding AOL questions. • **Recommend: develop reflective models/learning activities.** • Find additional delivery modes/times to increase accessibility to students.
12	Evidence	• Include more guidance in finding AOLs. • Revisit current guidance in RAL handbook.
13	Cultural issues	• **Recommend: develop reflective materials to meet different cultural needs.** • Make resources accessible. • Make staff and student expectations explicit.
14	Difficulties	• Use and application of level descriptors. • Guidance for reflective learning. • **Recommend: review learning materials for accessibility/ user friendly.**
15	Develop RAL	• **Recommend further research of practice.** • Guidance for advisors and students, increase accessible examples. • **Make staff/student expectations explicit.** • Consider learning communities to support students.

Recommendations arising from the findings are written in **red**.

On distribution to CEWBL coordinators in other schools and other WBL staff, I received very positive feedback. One individual stated:

> *"What I have found so refreshing about it, is that it avoids jargon and also opens up so many possibilities for students to have a real discourse around their learning… the word category suggests clear demarcations whereas it seems what you are providing students with are nine pairs of glasses through the lenses of which they will be able to see different things and also connections…".*

This supported my view that the term 'volume descriptor' would be more appropriate, but also these descriptors were not restrictive as could so easily be the case, but allowed all the users to be creative.

Interview categories

The amount of data generated through these interviews made me reflect on the process of action research and whether I should perhaps have just interviewed colleagues for this project. However, I felt that although I had a huge amount of data, it was all useful and would feed into a number of CEWBL projects, not just this one. I felt that it captured a wide range of expertise and sound practice which was valuable in itself, and my role in the CEWBL allowed greater use and application of it to inform a variety of WBL practices.

When compiling Table 4.3, it was apparent that it could not all be explored and discussed in this project report due to space and word limitations, but evidence of the data will be incorporated into the academic and claimant guides, and crucial issues are addressed in the next chapter. Much of the richness of experience and skills seemed to be lost in the analysis, as the strength of narrative was lost (Bowling, 2002). This exemplifies the individualised process of the RAL claims as practised at MU, as it is the holistic nature of the claim and assessment which makes the experience so meaningful to the individual claimant.

One aspect that did emerge was in response to the question 'how can we improve the facilitator's role?'. The themes from that suggested several actions that could be taken.

Table 4.4: Themes from Developing the RAL Facilitator's Role

These themes grouped around 'teaching strategies', 'assessing' and 'processes'.

Teaching strategies	Assessing
• Use more reflective models or cycles as examples. • Use of techniques such as workshops at evenings or weekends, video conferencing. • More use of exercises to help to discover experiential learning. • More structured resources. • Develop use of VLE with more examples of past work and sharing good practice. • Develop students' academic vocabulary.	• Make assessment criteria more accessible. • Use joint assessment or staff group assessments as a way of quality monitoring and mentoring. • Discuss moderation of work and share with colleagues. • Blind marking to monitor quality and consistency of assessments.
Processes	
• Develop different ways of working/teaching. • Develop clearer guidance for students to increase their autonomy. • Improve structures, processes and infrastructure. • Develop comprehensive and sophisticated guidelines. • Standardise more, using technical and rational approaches where possible. • Awareness that students have paid for our time and we should find ways of ensuring they get their due time and credit. • Evaluate the programme and develop accordingly.	

Some themes are also reflected within the interviews and marked as areas for development and recommendation, but the above were answers to the specific question 'how can we improve the facilitator's role?' and, accordingly, are extracted separately.

Cycle 4

This final cycle included finalisation of the new assessment criteria as 'volume descriptors' (see Appendix 8) and application to practice by inclusion into the

teaching and learning resources for the module, thus fulfilling the objective to introduce the new teaching and learning resources and assessment criteria into the WBL programmes. Integration required collegial collaboration to incorporate new material into the teaching materials, both in hard copy and for the VLE. It also involved writing guidance for claimants and academics and disseminating findings internally and externally, thus meeting the final project objective of dissemination.

Plan 4

Interview of 'expert' researchers in APEL

Having trialled the volume descriptors internally, I also searched the literature again to see if there was any comparable work elsewhere. Johnson and Walsh (2000), Walsh and Johnson (2001) and Johnson (2004) have all undertaken national surveys on the use of APEL. Through accessing their publications I wondered whether an interview with either or both of these authors might offer me a wider perspective than if I was to approach several other universities, as these publications captured much current practice of APEL nationally. Therefore, I contacted one of the authors and asked for an interview, to validate some of the descriptors that I had identified and seek for any omissions.

Evaluating volume descriptors

An evaluation sheet was sent to 12 academics in January 2007 at the end of the assessment period (see Appendix 6) to evaluate the usage of the volume descriptors during the previous semester. Only five out of twelve were returned, but there were several qualitative comments, as well as quantitative data which enabled small adjustments to be made. All respondents considered that the teaching resource pack and the VLE would be suitable sites for the volume descriptors to be located, which linked to other VLE developments being undertaken in the department.

This cycle also included planning dissemination opportunities for the project. Internal dissemination would be through the new module materials and VLE workshops, and to academic colleagues through subject group meetings. Consideration of further

teaching and learning developments and remedial actions would also emerge and enable planning over the summer period to be integrated into the new semester.

External dissemination has been through conference presentations and articles to interested groups such as SEEC[8] (see conference abstracts in Appendix 10), an assessment study day and a UALL[9] Annual Conference in WBL and academic accreditation. I have been approached by another university to work with them on a funded project to develop guidance for e-APEL, where the questions and criteria generated through this project may expedite the e-APEL process. There are also discussions with another university regarding negotiation of WBL contracts, where determining the size of work based projects might be guided by some of these criteria. Being part of the CETL network will provide opportunities for dissemination at other events.

Writing the guidance for facilitators of RAL also took some planning, as initially I considered that it could be in the form of general guidance for APEL, and therefore I did consider some guidance from other sources on which to model it. However, by the time I was ready to begin, it was apparent that the RAL module was so different to the practice of most other HEIs that I decided that specific guidance running parallel to the sections in the module resource pack would be the most helpful, hence the structure (see Appendix 9). This has been shared with colleagues for feedback, thus validating the data drawn from the interviews.

Act 4

Evaluation of volume descriptors

The amended volume descriptor sheet (Table 4.5 below) was attached to an evaluation sheet and five respondents commented.

The written and verbal feedback included comments regarding criteria 4: 'Makes difference academic levels **explicit** within one area of learning. Clearly demonstrates learning and knowledge at more than one level within claim, i.e. reflection and

[8] Southern England Education Consortium.
[9] UALL – Universities Association of Lifelong Learning.

analysis of learning and/or consequent impact on others is clearly evident', where one respondent had commented "*how would they know?*", meaning how would a claimant know that differences were evident. This seemed to be a pertinent observation and consequently the descriptor was rephrased in a way that the claimants might understand it more clearly. To make it clearer it was expressed as: 'Demonstrates building levels of learning from first principles through increasing complexity, i.e. includes reflection and analysis and/or consequent impact upon others, application in several contexts'.

The underlying intention was that the different academic levels through knowledge to analysis, synthesis and evaluation (as expressed by Bloom, 1956) would be explicit, thereby potentially raising the credit volume at several levels.

With regard to Criteria 8, 'Previous claims in similar subject areas set benchmarks and/or precedence for assessor', the feedback indicated that claimants would not understand that working with organisational accreditation or cohorts had given particular tutors knowledge of credit values of in-house training programmes, and therefore that was removed. Having started with ten criteria initially, of which five had been sub-divided, only five of the original criteria were still present and were no longer sub-divided into smaller categories.

The last criteria, 'Making planned programme and minimum credits explicit', was removed as a category, but advisory notes remained so that claimants were aware of the requirement to be specific in supplementary claims. This left a total of just seven volume descriptors, but the final associated written guidance will enable new assessors and claimants to take account of all these factors that experienced academics use when assessing RAL.

Academic feedback also indicated that the credit amount guide (which is highlighted on the bottom of the assessor's guidance) had not been used or taken account of, and therefore I decided that until further work had been done on correlating credit values alongside the descriptors it would be wise to omit it in the student guidance and probably in the academic guidance too as no-one had used it. Colleagues had

expressed concern that claimants might have seen the credit values as obligatory rather than guidance, thus potentially creating misunderstandings in the assessment process. Circulation of the revised volume descriptors to all academics before inclusion in the module resource packs and VLE provided additional opportunities for minor adjustments and the final volume descriptors are included in Appendix 8.

Table 4.5: Volume Descriptors Sheet Evaluated January 2007

Making the most of credits in a RAL claim

Assessors Guide

The number of volume descriptors represented within a claim can be an approximate guide as to the volume of credit that can be awarded. The use of several descriptors does not necessarily guarantee extra credits. The claimant must be explicit and effectively elaborate within the claim to optimise the credit award. The lower volumes of credit stated in the category table would be appropriate if the descriptors are minimal. Where descriptors have been fully exploited and incorporated into the analysis of learning then more credits may be awarded.

Volume descriptors	Credit volume guide
• **1**	Recognition of incremental learning over a period of years, demonstrates broadening or deepening of learning and knowledge over time
• **2**	Similar explicit outcome or product to: • a validated module or • accredited learning activity or • WBL project outcomes
• **3**	Presented in sections or components that reflect: Learning outcomes or specific learning incidents
• **4**	Different academic levels **explicit** within one AOL. Clearly demonstrates learning and knowledge at more than one academic level within claim, i.e. reflection and analysis of learning and/or consequent impact upon others is clearly evident
• **5**	Recognition of formal training/education hours, or qualification older than 5 years. (10 hours = 1 credit) (Same training days can only be used once per RAL portfolio)
• **6**	Variety of sources of knowledge used and/or demonstrates Originality /Uniqueness / Creativity
• **7**	High quality of evidence presented and annotated appropriately
• **8**	Previous claims in similar subject areas set benchmarks and/or precedence for assessor
• **9**	Planned programme and minimum credits required made explicit (e.g. secondary claim)

Guide to assessment for credit volume descriptors per individual AOL

No of descriptors used	Credit amounts possible
1 - 5	5 - 40 credits
4 -7	10 – 50 “
6 - 9	20 – 60 “

Variable credit amounts available to allow academic judgement regarding the quality and academic level of claim to determine credit volume awarded per AOL.

Interview with 'expert' APEL researcher

The interview with an expert APEL researcher was arranged and undertaken on neutral territory and consisted of an informal conversation discussing previous research undertaken on behalf of SEEC and other APEL related enquiries, as well as the findings and experience of APEL assessment in relation to credit volume and level. Only two assessment criteria became evident from the previous research enquiry undertaken by this researcher, and these were 'specified notional hours of learning' and 'equivalence to formal taught modules'. As these criteria were already accounted for in my explorations I took them to be confirmations of my findings, but felt a mixture of disappointment and relief that no other criteria were forthcoming.

Observe 4

Developing teaching and learning materials

The development of the VLE as a teaching and learning resource area was running parallel to this project on RAL. Together with several academics involved in the postgraduate RAL module, I agreed to meet to review and share the teaching and learning activities that support RAL on the VLE postgraduate programme site. Although this activity was not part of this project, the project findings were included to inform claimants about RAL. The postgraduate module leader agreed that findings could be integrated into the postgraduate teaching materials as the opportunity had arisen and my contribution was accepted readily by all participants, therefore enabling the objective of integrating new teaching and learning materials into the WBL programme. Working with the undergraduate module presented more challenges and I decided it was appropriate to seek a suitable opportunity.

The opportunity soon arose with changes in the learning framework of the university, which required the undergraduate RAL module to increase its credit value from ten to fifteen credits at level 2. Consequently, teaching materials would be expanded, and therefore additional teaching and learning strategies from this project could be introduced into the resource materials. To achieve this, I decided to personally review and update the resource pack for the undergraduate module and include the additional learning materials.

This had several points in its favour, not least that the module leader would have support to update and enlarge the resource pack, but also the integration of the new content into the module resource materials would then be uploaded onto the VLE, therefore becoming accessible to all undergraduate students. By contributing to the teaching materials I was able to overcome resistance from the module leader regarding integration of the new information, as it complemented the enlarged module by contributing to a formative assessment (see Appendix 11), which needed to be explicit for the claimants and for their academic advisers. The amended resource pack made it available to all, whether studying on or off campus.

While the collaborative review of RAL teaching resources provided an opportunity to integrate student information onto the VLE resources, guidance for academics was created as an adjunct to an induction pack. It seemed appropriate that the structure of the facilitator guidance should mirror the claimant resource pack, so the interview data supported each section from findings from the data. I had to bear in mind that the claimant resource pack was one half of the learning activity and that facilitators would need the learning strategies that corresponded to the students' learning. This meant that things like useful questions to ask when identifying AOLs or when assisting a claimant to reflect upon their learning were included, as well as strategies that experienced facilitators use with claimants to encourage reflective thinking and enable them to find learning from experience. The point where the portfolio is submitted for assessment becomes the point where the facilitator's guide draws on data related to assessment and passes on tips for assessing portfolios (see Appendix 9), thus switching roles from facilitator to assessor.

Reflect 4

Reviewing the RAL postgraduate module materials as part of the VLE developments proved to be a useful exercise, as it enabled identification of where and how the findings from the project could fit into the current teaching resources. However, working with the undergraduate RAL module proved to be quite a challenge.

Insider researcher

As an insider researcher, the activity of using systems inherent within a given situation to produce change is congruent with the action research philosophy of using the power of the research process to facilitate change of practice through empowerment of participants (Fox *et al*., 2007). However, an organisation is not without its political elements, especially in action research (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). One such issue was whether taking over writing learning materials becomes a political activity, by achieving that which is required by using personal power of expertise and seniority, rather than empowering participants, and as such could be highly contentious. Action research intends to empower those who participate within a project, but I had perceived from early on that some academics had been reluctant to participate, possibly due to lack of personal confidence and expertise, although this is my assumption. It must be admitted then, on my part, that this was less about the research process and more about controlling the situation and participants in order to achieve my aims for the project. However, as part of my aims for the project was to enable the claimants to make better RAL claims, this required all academics to develop their skills as facilitators. If this was not possible on an individual basis, whether through lack of cooperation or interest, or time, then it had to be achieved by providing equality of teaching materials so that all claimants had equal opportunity to access and engage with effective teaching and learning activities, whatever location they were studying in, as well as all academic advisers having access to amended learning materials.

As an experienced educator, I recognised that my research had a contribution to make to the quality of the learning process, but as an outsider to the main academic team I could not overrule current practices and module leadership and had to recognise that introduction of my research findings in general, and in relation to the undergraduate RAL in particular, had to take into consideration other academic roles and responsibilities and I did not have the authority to impose any changes or teaching activities but had to find ways of integrating them into routine practice. However, the process of inclusion of additional learning materials into the handbooks had clearly demonstrated that difficulties arise when a job role is devised that is related to curriculum development and improvement, but where the role holder has no direct responsibility for the curriculum delivery. Therefore, any changes in practice have to

be adopted through either persuasion, coercion, imposition or training activities. In terms of formal change strategies, power-coercion (rather than a normative re-educative approach) was utilised (Bennis *et al*., 1985) as, regretfully in this case, I had to resort to imposition, reinforced by education when it can be done collectively and not focused on any one person, thus reducing the pressure of compliance on any single individual.

Dissemination

Actual dissemination activities have begun and, at the time of writing, the first external opportunities have arisen where I was able to share the volume descriptors (see Appendix 12). These were occasions when I had hoped there would be other practitioners conversant with a range of APEL approaches rather than, as was the case, being groups with a wide range of experience from novices to experts, which made it difficult to invigorate a discussion around assessing APEL outside module templates. However, as a consequence of these presentations, it became apparent that for claimants coming in with no prior understanding of academic frameworks, descriptors 8 (previous cases setting precedents) and 9 (secondary claims) were not viable for student use and this helped to make the decision to remove them. They are, however, retained in the academic guidance as general guidance for facilitation.

Discussion of the findings follows in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The outcomes of this project have focused on a particular organisational activity: facilitating and assessing experiential learning involving managing change through an action research approach, working with colleagues to develop and improve practice. While the initial plan was not to problematise the RAL module activity, the process of scrutinising it revealed a number of issues which are explored further in this chapter. The main issues appear to relate more to those of educational practice in HE, rather than of APEL itself, and therefore the discussion will reflect that.

This chapter will consider some key themes that have emerged from the findings of the previous chapter, as well as the extent to which the project objectives have been fulfilled. There is insufficient word allowance to explore every theme that has been revealed in the data, but each of the four cycles of project activity in turn will be discussed, pertinent key findings explored and the resultant recommendations will be identified. The chapter concludes with reflections on the role of the insider researcher during the project process.

Cycle 1

This cycle explored the student experience of the RAL module and the impact it had upon their learning experience. The experience was perceived by the respondents as being largely positive, with benefits for their work and personal lives. Although there was a low number of respondents, it confirmed findings from the literature that self-confidence and self-awareness were increased as a result of completing a RAL claim, which reflects previous research (Evans, 1994). The learning experience was reported to be generally good, although there were two qualitative responses whose experience did not match with their expectations, and they consequently discontinued the programme. Other respondents considered that it had positively affected both their work and ability to learn from work (e.g. Hamill and Sutherland, 1994) and it was perceived to be a challenging module, not only academically but emotionally for

some, and time consuming, all of which is reflected in previous literature (e.g. Heron, 1992; Merrifield *et al*., 2000).

Those who discontinued the programme highlighted that the APEL approach is not suitable for all students, especially those who have not had the benefit of a traditional education and early academic success, and that it is not a panacea for all adult students wishing to gain academic qualifications. However, an aim of WBL is to enable learners to critically appraise their work practices (Garnett *et al*., 2004), and this is demonstrated at the outset where RAL enables claimants to take a reflective stance on their learning from work and recognise that the RAL module in particular, and the WBL programme in general, can make a positive impact on other work and learning activities.

The eight reflective essays reinforced the positive feedback of the learning experience, and identified six themes demonstrating personal and professional impact on learning and career aspirations. Interestingly, the two respondents who left the programme as a result of not achieving their credit expectations, reported positive feelings and improved self-confidence in the essay, which was written at the time of submission and therefore reflected their feelings on completion of coursework, as yet untainted by a disappointing credit award. This suggests that it was the disappointing result that coloured their later written response and that deciding to leave was as a consequence of poor personal achievement, and they attempted to cope with the consequent cognitive dissonance by blaming an academic for giving them apparently confusing feedback. Other feedback on learning activities suggested that understanding academic terminology and knowing the expectations of the university were two areas that could be improved.

The issue of student expectations when starting a university course is something to be considered; whether they know what their expectations are, or whether these expectations are explicit or implicit, as it suggests that students need to be aware of the type of demands that the WBL programme will make upon them. Ramsden (2003) notes that the first few weeks of a university course are crucial to success on a programme, as students are often confused about what it is they have come to learn and how they will be taught. As the WBL students tend to be mature and older than

the traditional university student, frequently with fewer formal qualifications, their concept of what it is to learn within a university can be unrealistic and influenced by their previous educational experiences, which may be outdated and outmoded. As Ramsden notes:

> "It is indisputable that, from the students' perspective, clear standards and goals are a vitally important element of an effective educational experience, and lack of clarity… is almost always associated with negative evaluations, learning difficulties and poor performance" (2003:123).

Consequently, it may be appropriate to revisit the WBL information literature and course handbooks to ensure that the course demands are portrayed realistically, and that it is explicit that the WBL route may not be suitable for all students, as well as clarifying what the university expectations are for claimants and academic staff in terms of academic and programme support. Indeed, it would be good educational practice to ensure that all introductory information, both hard copy and electronic, is easy to access and free from academic jargon, to enable new learners to develop their awareness and understanding of the demands of HE.

Other findings indicate that the use of academic jargon and terminology was a problem to the claimants. Academic terminology has been noted by others as being a hurdle to overcome in APEL (Warner Weil and McGill, 1989; Trowler, 1996; Peters, 2004; Pokorny, 2006), with students having to learn the language of academia in order to make a successful claim (Peters, 2006). The difficulty with WBL was less to do with finding acceptable language for HE, unlike previous APEL research, but related more to understanding the terminology that academics use, such as 'analyse', 'discourse' etc, and what that meant when writing RAL claims. This finding, together with student feedback that assessment using level descriptors was unclear, resulted in a reappraisal of the RAL resource packs and adding explanations of key words and tasks, as well as a fuller explanation of what the level descriptors mean (see Appendix 8), to clarify criteria. A minor difficulty with this was that these amendments were carried out as part of the work of the CEWBL, and were seen as separate to the RAL module leader's responsibilities, thus not directly relating these changes to curriculum delivery. The draft versions of the level descriptors were sent around all UK WBL

academic staff for comment and feedback, so that there was a collaborative approach to making them transparent and comprehensive. These amendments were added to the next academic year's teaching materials and therefore would be evaluated by the CEWBL in the future. Introducing any changes in teaching materials has to be shared with academics, both on and off campus, to ensure that all participants are aware of the requirements of the programme.

These amendments are in accordance with the goals of good teaching which Ramsden identifies as "teaching to make learning happen" (2003:110), where teaching is conceived as a process of working cooperatively with students to help them change their understanding by creating a context of learning that encourages them to engage with the subject matter. In the case of APEL, this engagement is with their own experiential knowledge and learning and the role of the academic is to enable them to articulate their experiential learning. As part of the philosophy of 'teaching to make learning happen', the teacher focuses on the essential issues that represent critical barriers to the student's learning (Ramsden, 2003). Skilful facilitation is required to move the barriers to enable experiential learning to be recognised and articulated. As Doncaster (2000) notes, undertaking a RAL claim generates within the claimant a strong sense of self-discovery and it is a learning process in itself to develop the skill of reflective analysis. It is also an opportunity for the claimant to discover whether this method of accessing a university programme is suitable, and whether study at HE level is feasible, thus also being diagnostic. If considered within Kolb's (1984) learning cycle (see Chapter Two), the stage of reflective observation as linked to the RAL module also informs future learning by alerting the learner to 'abstract conceptualisations' of possible future solutions to be tested as part of the research and project processes, and hence lays the foundation for the rest of the individual learner's programme.

This cycle met the first three objectives of the project by evaluating the students' experiences of the RAL module. On reflection, I realised that the claimants' input had been limited to just cycle one and not included elsewhere in later cycles, other than in the discussion of changes through a Board of Studies, and that a fuller evaluation of their experience would be appropriate. In recognition of this, I would recommend that an evaluation of the student experience of the whole programme should be

undertaken, particularly prior to revalidation of the curriculum framework (due shortly), with further consultation on student preferences regarding the programme and curriculum content and teaching and learning approaches, including the claimants' readiness for ICT, online and blended learning as a supplement to our current mode of course delivery.

Cycle 2

This cycle involved interviewing academics to capture their experiences of RAL facilitation and assessment, and to make it explicit so that it could be shared with others and, where appropriate, introduced into common practice. Themes for exploration in this cycle related to the facilitation, process, quality and consistency of assessment, and the initial development of assessment criteria from oral data to assess credit volume within RAL claims. Assessment practice was considered in relation to initiating sharing of good practice across the WBL community within the university. Other factors identified in this cycle concerned the learning and facilitation strategies used to support the RAL module and the development of example resources.

The practice of RAL assessment by experienced academics is one that is usually learnt on the job, through repetition and application, and where familiarity promotes flexibility and practised judgements (Merrifield *et al*., 2000). The tacit knowledge of colleagues was sought in order to capture their expertise in RAL assessment due to the different approach that MU takes to APEL. Clark (1999) describes tacit knowledge as being highly personal and hard to formalise, particularly because it is deeply embedded in the actions and experience of individuals, thus making it subjective and intuitive. Therefore, to share it, it must be converted into a format understandable by others. The type of tacit knowledge being sought here is that of the technical dimension, which encompasses the 'know-how' of informal skills and the crafted knowledge of a master or expert, which is a result of much experience, although filtered by personal subjective insights, intuition and experience. Because the very nature of this knowledge is intangible, elusive and subjective, it is difficult to extract and transfer to other contexts as others will process and interpret it according to their own experience and situation. However, by gathering the tacit knowledge of

experienced practitioners as far as possible and then collating it, it becomes available to a wider audience and contributes to the body of knowledge which informs our practice (i.e. the intellectual capital of the CEWBL) (Garnett, 2005). This skilled responsiveness and adaptability by expert academics to a context that simulates actual assessment practice is something that is not completely transferable, but is used to encapsulate the explicit knowledge for use by others. Making it accessible to novice practitioners of APEL within and outside the CEWBL, through publication and dissemination, meets the requirement for action research to generate theory and understanding for others (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005) as extrapolated from experience. In relation to the objectives of the project, the expert knowledge garnered from the data will contribute to the body of knowledge of APEL to be shared with a wider professional audience.

In the case of RAL assessment, the transmission of assessment practice has not, until now, been a formal documented process, but has depended on individual academic mentors sharing their assessment insights, knowledge and skills with new academic mentees, and its effectiveness depends upon the mentor and the previous teaching and assessing experience of the mentee. RAL at MU is not quite the same as assessing APEL where the learning is matched with programme learning outcomes and syllabus objectives, and presented in accordance with certain academic subject conventions. Rather, as discussed in Chapter Two, it takes all the learning offered by the claimant, whether it is related or unrelated to a specific programme, and recognises it as learning that may span both academic and vocational knowledge and skills, thus providing a potential foundation for the claimant to build their own academic programme. This alternative approach to APEL is one which Eraut (2001) would identify as being valuable to mid-career vocational mature students, who are taught to use theory to critique practice as well as using their practical experience to critique theory, thereby using APEL to develop current competence rather than confirm existing competences, and hence confirms a forward looking focus that builds on the past (Doncaster, 2000). Experience indicates that this type of student, typical of those who undertake the WBL programme at MU, gains both personally and professionally from the RAL module, as evidenced from the previous cycle.

Assessment of APEL therefore requires skills of academic judgement in relation to the level and amount of credit, as well as subject expertise. When the academics assessed the AOLs in this cycle, which were then blind assessed by myself, a number of inconsistencies were found between credits awarded to claimants by different assessors, and feedback from academics regarding the blind assessment process suggested that some submissions were not necessarily of the standard that the academics in their role as adviser would have been happy to condone, thus suggesting that there may be inconsistencies in assessment and guidance to claimants regarding satisfactory AOL claims (see cycle 2, observe 2, Chapter Four). Consequently, the comments that were made on AOLs have now been incorporated into some example AOLs for future students to benefit from, as well as providing examples for other new academics (see Appendix 9), and will be made available as part of CEWBL teaching and learning resources. Other information, such as what assessors consider makes a good claim, have also been made explicit (see Appendix 8). These, together with the volume descriptors, make some advances towards a transparent and open assessment process, and offer models for both claimants and academics which are authentic, but not as value laden as they might be if they belonged to either the claimant or academic, and therefore critique is possible without incurring defensiveness from any party.

The outcome of reviewing assessment practice raises issues of parity, consistency, validity and maintenance of quality control as part of the normal assessment practice. One of the functions of assessment in HE is to provide feedback on quality assurance aspects of a programme (Bryan and Clegg, 2006). The assessment process for RAL was found not to be as consistent as previously assumed, particularly in the quality aspects of parity, validity and reliability of academic levels. Inculcation of assessment culture and practice occurs through a mentoring process, but this pre-supposes that a mentoring relationship is on-going and developmental. Unfortunately, the nature of the RAL assessment (i.e. marking a portfolio) can take several hours when time is at a premium during the university assessment calendar, and opportunities to share and discuss different portfolios with colleagues can be limited. Current custom and practice of RAL assessment provides moderation opportunities during which the expectation is that 10% of RAL portfolios are moderated by other academics.

However, the results of Table 4.1 show that although four results concurred with someone else, only two AOLs had the same agreed mark as that finally awarded and that three had marks that were widely different. While this is a small data set and therefore not fully representative, it does suggest that moderation of just 10% is more likely to equate to that which two assessors would agree with, rather than that which they would not, and as such 10% is not a sufficient number of moderations on which to make an assumption of assessment validity, reliability and quality assurance. It is known that assessment has a tendency towards subjectivity, even though objectivity is desired (Jarvis, 1999), so further research would be appropriate to explore other methods of collaborative assessment to strengthen assessment decisions and develop assessors' confidence. With this in mind, a recommendation is made that a greater proportion of RAL portfolios should be moderated, or collaboratively marked, perhaps using activities such as collaborative assessments where a larger proportion (say up to 20-25% of each assessor's RAL portfolios) are shared and moderated with other assessors, thus providing a staff development opportunity for the wider WBL community. As Race (1999) comments, team assessment provides more comprehensive feedback and a diverse range of experience for assessors and, by so doing, increases inter-rater reliability of assessors. It would also be appropriate to recommend that the academic judgements determining volume and level of credits should be clearly identified in feedback to the claimant, so that the process is more transparent to the claimant, other advisers and external assessors. Using portfolios for assessment (as in RAL) allows for a wide range of evidence of achievement, although some may find it difficult to follow the recommended structure and guidance for both claimants and academics, and it may be that this could be revisited in the light of this project. Actions to address this could include staff development sessions facilitated by the CEWBL.

Another important activity in this cycle was that of collecting oral data through interviews and developing the initial assessment criteria from them, together with the researcher also becoming a participant and actively contributing to the data. As Coghlan and Brannick (2005) note, as the researcher in action research, one is also an instrument in the generation of data by the very nature of the inquiry, and McNiff and Whitehead (2002) state that in the interpretive paradigm the practitioner is also a real life participant in the research with their views taken as valid. As I interviewed others

I was keen to add my knowledge and experience, and was concerned that it should not be 'lost' to the wider community. Van Heugten (2004) also used the approach of interviewing herself in order to deconstruct the world she was exploring, and as a means of developing alternative perspectives to the situation under study, and revealing potential blind spots. On reflection, I realised that I was probably valuing my knowledge more highly than that of others, which was why I felt compelled to contribute. Fox *et al.* (2007) note that the researcher defines the world through her research, necessarily simplifying its representation, but implying an arrogance of interpretation by the researcher's one view, which reflects my feeling about being compelled to contribute to the data, as later I realised that it suggested that my way was the only way. As a researcher within my own organisation I took a stance that both informed the project and reflected the project process, thus becoming a 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983). Being part of the project as a researcher and practitioner made me reflect on my practice and what I could contribute to the data being gathered. The process of gathering the data stimulated the recall of my own tacit knowledge and encouraged me to surface my knowledge in the light of others' experiences.

Consequently, it would have been beneficial to have involved colleagues more, especially the very experienced ones, in reviewing the data and drawing on their collective experience, but practically this was impossible. Instead, I presented my findings from the oral data in an early evaluation sheet for credit volume (see Appendix 5), which had been collated and analysed only by myself. Ideally, a collaborative project like this would have benefited from collegial scrutiny and interpretation to act as inter-rater reliability. In reality, getting colleagues to evaluate the early volume criteria was difficult enough due to their competing priorities and personal workloads. Part of being self-aware and reflexive must include sensitivity towards colleagues and adapting the research process accordingly. As Coghlan and Brannick (2005) identify, research may be self-selected by the researcher because it focuses on the researcher's job or role within the organisation, but should take into account organisational culture, power and political dynamics of which an insider researcher is able to be particularly aware. Fox *et al.* (2007) note that the relationship between the researched and the researcher should be reflexive, in that the researcher influences the researched and vice versa, both consciously and unconsciously, and

therefore the practitioner researcher must cater for this by reflecting on her practice. Fox *et al.* (2007) comment that this can lead to crises of authority and representation as the researcher defines the world through her research, unless the research participants are also able to actively contribute to the interpretations. Hence, wider involvement from others would have been ideal, however impractical.

Responses from academics at this stage in the project were through interviews and comments on written feedback of evaluation of assessment criteria. Collective working in a group would have been more collaborative, engaging more academics in the process, but this was limited by colleagues' availability. A limitation of this project is, therefore, that the degree of involvement by both academics and claimants was, of necessity, limited by convenience and expediency. Reluctance to participate in change can arise from a variety of causes, but the commonest is probably due to lack of resources. To implement change effectively, time and availability of individuals must be built into the change process; to allow participants to engage with the proposed change at any point of the process and gain ownership of it. Throughout this project I had to snatch time from other things in order to keep others involved and, essentially, resources of time, expertise and investment can be the things that prevent or limit effective change. Additionally, I had no authority over the participants to make them engage and participate, and again, ideally a major change needs to be driven by those who have authority over others. Initially this may involve making them engage, then later allowing them to continue in participation by freeing up time and resources.

To address the issue of data validity as used in credit volume criteria and other examples of facilitation practice, the process of trials and feedback from colleagues and dissemination of findings via different opportunities were the strategies used to address the validity criteria particularly of dialogic, process, outcome and democratic validity as defined by Herr and Anderson (2005) (see Table 3.2). Catalytic validity, which stimulates participants towards change, takes longer and requires the development of understanding about the actual changes in practice by those involved, and consequently is difficult to measure at this juncture in the project. If I had the authority to involve all colleagues collaboratively over a period of time, the degree of

change in practice would be deeper by now, as well as there being a greater degree of understanding of the project amongst my colleagues.

Cycle 3

This cycle involved the identification of themes from the academics' interviews and the emergence of recommendations and actions, which contributed to the objectives to create learning and teaching resources, and develop credit volume assessment criteria. There were fifteen categories that were identified (Table 4.3) and four main products resulted from the data, which were:

- volume descriptors (Appendices 8 and 9);
- 'finding areas of learning' (Appendix 8);
- facilitators guidance (Appendix 9); and
- level descriptors explained (Appendix 8).

Trialling the volume descriptors through three episodes of collegial feedback and assessment was undertaken during this cycle. The final version was amended up to six times, with minor adjustments made to terminology or layout following comments from individuals. The volume descriptors have been introduced into the RAL module resource packs for the academic year 2007/08 for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, so that there is the opportunity for all claimants to benefit from the research. Initially the study focused on the undergraduate programme, but as many academics who teach on both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes were included in the interviews, it seemed appropriate to use the findings to inform both programmes. Indeed, it could have been considered unethical not to have used the information for both programmes, as it could be deemed as withholding information from one or other programme, and claimants should be in possession of equal information to maximise their learning opportunities. The products that have been created from the data have informed several aspects of practice in APEL, enabling claimants to address the critical barriers that prevent them from learning (Ramsden, 2003). One possible product that has been identified from a theme, but has not yet been developed, is that of reflective learning activities. A resource pack had been

created by a colleague several years ago and is in use, but this project identifies that further information around reflection, including different models or tools to facilitate reflection, particularly for different subject disciplines and cultures whose previous experience is not reflexive, would be a beneficial development and is therefore one of my recommendations. This too is something that the CEWBL could contribute to the WBL programmes.

The development of the volume descriptors and facilitator guidance has provided an opportunity to support teaching and learning activities by capturing the tacit knowledge of academics and pooling their facilitation knowledge. Ramsden (2003) notes that good teaching should engage students with learning that is considered 'deep', as it enables the student to understand and apply the meaning and relevance to their subject area of interest, clearly understand what is expected of them, exercise choice in the content and study approach, and generate high quality, well structured outcomes and commitment to the subject being studied. Deep approaches to learning are related to higher quality outcomes and better grades, higher levels of satisfaction and enjoyment experienced by learners, as well as retaining more knowledge from the learning after a period of time (Ramsden, 2003). The approach to WBL programmes aims to facilitate students to engage at a deep level by taking these factors into consideration. It assists the claimant to articulate their subject interest and define their proposed outcomes in a way that is relevant and purposeful for their own learning, and take into consideration their preferences in relation to the content and study approach, which is particularly evident when planning the next stage in the programme, but is foregrounded through the RAL module. In RAL, the skills and knowledge that are recognised are related less to specific subject areas and more to transdisciplinary skills and knowledge, as evidenced by the variety of titles of AOLs as seen in Figure 4.5. By beginning with RAL where the focus is upon oneself, a sound way of engaging a learner is introduced and the individual's knowledge is then built upon, hence the need to develop further reflective guidance to surface tacit and experiential knowledge and to offer tools and processes to explore that knowledge in a way that can be used to create an individualised programme.

By introducing learning strategies that improve RAL claims and make more explicit what it is the academics are looking for, the outcomes can be clearer and more

focused, thereby enabling the learner to focus on studying their work and learning. However, there is a caveat to this. Ramsden (2003) reports that where the academics aimed to set learning activities to encourage deep learning approaches in order to improve students' learning, not all were successful as students became distracted by the learning activity itself and aimed to complete that rather than develop deeper understanding as intended. Consequently, the guidance will need both positive and negative factors evaluated in regard to the quality of RAL claims.

Also evident from the interviews was the recognition of the contested nature of RAL knowledge (Armsby *et al*., 2006) as being of a different discourse to that evidenced in APEL claims elsewhere; that is, claiming for WBL as learning in its own right and as a field of study (Portwood, 2000) rather than matching specific programme outcomes. Recognising APEL can facilitate a claimant's entry to HE, but could also be a disadvantage should he want to link into traditional HE programmes that do not cater for such knowledge created outside the academy. By coming through the route of WBL, APEL claimants are able to access HE and demonstrate that their experiential learning is equivalent to traditional learning, although different, and by undertaking a RAL claim they demonstrate graduate skills (see Figure 4.5). However, further guidance is needed to help learners succeed in bridging the gap between informal knowledge and formal knowledge (i.e. experiential knowledge and taught knowledge) in a way that interprets the experiential knowledge and makes it acceptable to HE. Therefore, information on 'how-to-do' RAL claims, and what is expected, is essential as it legitimises the knowledge (Armsby *et al*., 2006) by going through the process of recognition and accreditation as it is created by the claimants. Additionally, the individualised nature of RAL claims was highlighted by the academics, who found it difficult to assess de-contextualised AOLs, and the implications that this had for the assessment process. A key factor of the MU WBL programme is flexibility; meeting the needs of the individual learner, but this is constrained by the HE processes that are inevitable to maintain quality assurance processes and assessment standards that demonstrate that WBL in general, and RAL in particular, can be equivalent to traditional HE programmes, and may even contribute to a body of knowledge within a professional community.

The traditional methods of using APEL as either credit exchange or for development (Butterworth, 1992), or as access or advanced standing (Merrifield *et al*., 2000), is revisited in a text (see Andersson and Harris, 2006), which reviews a wide range of the theoretical underpinnings and current understandings of APEL, such as adult learning theories, social construct theory, situated knowledge, post-structuralism and complexity theories etc. Space and word limit preclude an in-depth exploration of the various strands of thoughts and theories, but there are several issues raised within it that are also reflected in the data from respondents. For example, the untraditional approach to presenting knowledge as being a challenge to academics (Osman, 2006), and the finding that the academics' power and authority is required when determining a claimant's readiness and ability to learn (Shalem and Steinberg, 2006) are also evidenced in the academics' interviews. Much of the literature around APEL (as discussed in Chapter Two) is associated with the process and purpose of APEL (e.g. Johnson, 2002; Merrifield *et al*., 2000; Garnett *et al*., 2004), rather than the underpinning theories and philosophies, of which there is very little, although writers such as Harris (2000) consider the educational approach. Wheelahan (2006) argues that APEL claimants should be enabled to use their prior knowledge, skills and experiences to make connections between their different learning experiences and use them in the context of their vocation, in order to connect the meanings between different parts of their lives. This is a factor which is evident in the approach taken in RAL, where claimants are asked to reflect on their voluntary and unpaid activities, and if considered significant to include them in their RAL claims (see Appendix 8 "Using the CV"). However, the key thing that does emerge from Andersson and Harris' (2006) publication is that MU's contribution to the APEL literature is completely absent from the text, which suggests that the MU approach has not been communicated effectively, nor demonstrated its potential to those who are also open to alternative approaches, nor has the CEWBL fully explored and published the philosophical, theoretical or educational basis of WBL and APEL. I am aware that I have not addressed any of these either, but that was not the purpose of this project. However, through this project I have become aware of the deficits and therefore I would make a recommendation that these be addressed by the CEWBL, and that a conscious effort is made to explore the philosophical foundations of APEL as practised at MU, in order to communicate our knowledge, skills, expertise, theories, philosophies and understanding of APEL to a wider audience. This may, for example,

make a relevant contribution to the current debate regarding the transfer of credits between HEIs (Connor, 2005).

The outputs of this cycle will be made accessible to claimants and academics. The RAL resource packs have additional material included: 'Finding an area of learning', 'Making the most of your RAL claim' (using volume descriptors), and 'Level descriptors as assessment criteria' (see Appendix 8). The volume descriptors currently suggest ways that credit can be maximised, but at this point do not offer a formula for achieving a particular amount of credit. If it is apparent that claimants use these descriptors and it makes a difference to the quality and volume of the claims, then further work should be undertaken to refine the credit rating amounts for each descriptor. Although one example from another university (University of Portsmouth, 2006, discussed in Chapter Two) showed a link between descriptors and specific amounts of credit, my findings are inconclusive and I am unable to make such a recommendation here.

The inclusion of new information in the RAL resource packs means that information will be accessible both in hard copy and electronically for all claimants, so that even if individual advisers lack confidence to use them, claimants can still access and use them. Like all change activities, there will be those who adopt the strategies quickly and those who take longer but adopt eventually, when it can be seen that there is some individual benefit (Knight, 2002). The guidance for facilitators which includes all these components, but written from the stance of the academic, is available on the CEWBL password protected website for all WBL lecturers, as well as in hard copy.

The creation of the volume descriptors took several iterations, and these are now something that can be used and developed further later. These descriptors can be likened to criterion referenced assessment descriptors which state assessment criteria, and then assess the claimant's ability to meet it (Biggs, 1999). As RAL assessment is strongly qualitative in nature, the expectations of what different credit amounts look like can be captured and expressed within these qualitative statements, so that all assessors and students can refer to them to provide some consistency. Assessment by criteria can reflect differences in credit volume and matching of specific descriptors rather than comparisons between claimants, thus being very appropriate for WBL

students who present learning that may have taken years or months to learn in an unplanned or haphazard way through work activities, and which would not reflect usual credit volume calculations of notional hours of study. Some academic respondents have stated that they take a holistic view of the RAL assessment process and therefore the criterion referenced approach would be able to recognise the intrinsic value of the overall claim (Biggs, 1999).

The use of criterion referenced assessment provides a fairer, more accountable assessment regime than norm referencing, as the claimant is measured against standards of achievement rather than against each other (Dunn *et al*., 2002), thus fulfilling the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2006) requirements for explicit, valid and reliable assessment. By stating these volume criteria and making them available to the claimants at the beginning of the programme, the application is transparent at the outset. Until these volume descriptors were articulated and made explicit, there were no means to communicate them either to claimants or other academics, but this project has enabled the RAL assessment process to develop further. The process of devising and using criterion referenced assessment has been criticised as requiring considerable negotiation to identify agreed criteria, but this has been addressed through trialling and testing the volume descriptors with colleagues. It has been suggested that the use of descriptive standards echo competence statements and, as such, could be perceived as being reductionist and task orientated, resulting in subjective assessment decisions (Dunn *et al*., 2002). These criticisms may be apposite to positivist subject disciplines, whose grading systems traditionally follow a specific distribution curve or normative assessment, but WBL tends to reflect a social science curriculum philosophy (Boud, 2001) where the qualitative approach with its inherent bias is familiar to practitioners, and moderation processes are intended to ameliorate the subjective nature of the assessment process, which is accepted by many as inevitable in qualitative assessments.

It was during this cycle that I became aware that the original title of the project no longer reflected the actual project activity. The claimants' experience was limited to the first cycle and had been captured by a questionnaire and documentary evidence, but there had been limited involvement in the project activity. The academics' experience was bounded by their knowledge of assessment and facilitation and was

not fully representative of the concept of investigating their tacit knowledge of the module as a whole. After some thought and deliberation it became clear that while the aims, objectives and methodology of the project had not changed, the focus upon practice developments now took precedence, and consequently the title was changed to reflect that.[10]

Cycle 4

This cycle involved the development of guidance for RAL facilitators which overlapped with the previous cycle's discussion in relation to the importance of the teaching, learning and assessment strategies used in WBL. This cycle's discussion considers management and dissemination of the project, and my role as the worker/ insider/ researcher, and reflections on the project process.

Baume (2002) notes that, in the case of educational projects, there has been very little guidance given to the actual management of the projects, and suggests various strategies for project management including concern for quality enhancement within disciplinary demands and alignment with institutional priorities. In relation to this project, the subject matter of APEL was chosen to reflect the needs of the subject area, which later had the additional benefit of contributing to the CEWBL targets, and to enhance the quality of teaching and learning within WBL. Since the university was awarded the CEWBL and I was appointed, it was appropriate that my project should reflect the agenda of the CEWBL and aim to spread and share good practice from the subject discipline of WBL. This was made easier due to the CEWBL objectives of spreading WBL across the university, and it also provided a platform from which to work strategically to benefit the university as a whole. Baume (2002) also identifies two other factors that assist in implementing change as ownership of the change being introduced and relationships with peers and colleagues. He notes that academics are more likely to adopt innovations which they have had some stake in creating, and he advises that the widest feasible consultation should be undertaken during the project

[10] The original title had been: "Recognition and accreditation of work based learning in the undergraduate curriculum: investigating the participants' experience of the accreditation process".

and during any successive iterations, as that will promote wider adoption of any changes.

Consideration of the need for collaboration and the implementation of change meant that the choice of action research as a methodology was the most appropriate. As a research method, action research promotes collaborative and participative working which is adapted to the context and situation that I, as the researcher, find myself in (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). I was aware of the mechanisms of communication and consultation available to me through the routine meetings of the NCWBLP and WBLAU, and did manage to gain additional collegial time and input through some other activities, such as designing learning activities for the postgraduate RAL module, but all of these relied on optimising the opportunity intended for some other purpose and using it to communicate and engage colleagues in my project. This had limited success, as one could not always guarantee who would attend, nor who would be less pressured with their own work at any given time that I wanted to meet with individuals or groups. Asking for collegial feedback on draft guidance or evaluation of volume descriptors resulted in deliberately targeting some individuals, particularly those whom I felt would contribute effectively, or who, because of their teaching responsibilities, would need to know what was being proposed in order to contribute to or adopt any outcomes later. This I found quite hard to do, as I am not comfortable with demanding things from colleagues, especially when there is no immediate benefit for them, but it was important that there should be some engagement so that the additional guidance and teaching resources would be accessed and adapted for their own use. Thomas (2002) comments that to be effective in managing projects one needs to use the connections between activities and networking where possible, so that collaboration can be developed. Certainly, I was aware of the need for reciprocity at times, to work collaboratively and to be approachable for colleagues and their needs in order to promote good relationships between myself and others (Baume, 2002).

Having explored APEL within the WBL programme and when preparing to write the facilitators guidance, including reading through a number of APEL process orientated documents, I decided that I should investigate the APEL guidance as available to the rest of the university and visited the intranet, and then the external MU webpage. I

was quite shocked to discover that in fact the only reference to APEL was as being part of WBL and it was not offered on many programmes as a way of widening access and participation to other traditional programmes. I knew that there were pockets of practice (for example in health), but I had not fully appreciated how limited this facility was. I now realise the potential opportunities that WBL could offer in a number of subject areas, and am aware that there is a great deal more to do to disseminate APEL across the university. This would be a suitable task for the CEWBL, as this project has provided an opportunity to develop practice in APEL as well as gaining expert knowledge to contribute to this further. Additionally, the progress that WBL has made during the first two years of the CEWBL has eased the entry into other schools, and such an investigation will be easier to pursue now. It is especially pertinent in today's culture, where students have to work whilst studying at HE in order to afford it, and as many of our students are not of the traditional age group or with the usual entry qualifications; this suggests that they may be suitable candidates to gain credit towards their chosen programmes through APEL. I would anticipate that a number of barriers against APEL within the university would be the same to those found externally (e.g. Merrifield *et al*., 2000; Garnett *et al*., 2004; Johnson, 2004), such as lack of expertise within subject disciplines, protection of the academic discipline, the anticipated time consumption of both claimants and academics, and ignorance of the potential that APEL offers to mature learners. Another factor is adherence to the new Learning Framework's regulations (Middlesex University, 2007), which require learners to meet 100% of module learning outcomes, which make APEL more difficult to integrate into other programmes. These factors would need to be addressed to promote APEL within the university. Consequently, I recommend that the use of APEL across the university be audited with a view to develop APEL practice to contribute to the widening participation and access agenda, and to overcome current barriers to APEL and facilitate its increased uptake.

One of the questions that had been asked during the interviews was how the role of the adviser could be improved. The three themes that came up (teaching strategies, assessing and processes) are shown in Table 4.4. The major issues raised in teaching and assessing have been addressed in the recommendations and products from the project, but not all those from 'processes' have, particularly those related to the way that the programme is structured and delivered and how the student and adviser

relationship works. Several academic respondents suggested that we reconsider how we deliver programmes, bearing in mind that we deal almost exclusively with the working population, but make few adjustments for this in our times of programme delivery (for example, very rarely offering evening or weekend teaching sessions or acknowledging a full distance learning approach). A recommendation would be to ask our students about preferred teaching times for on-campus sessions, or whether we should go entirely resource based with more emphasis on on-line learning. Another comment was that our programme has not been fully evaluated, particularly in relation to the impact in the workplace, and the presence of the CEWBL would make it an appropriate venture to undertake, particularly before the next validation of the programme when there are opportunities to make some adjustments to it. In relation to the future of WBL in MU, evaluation of the impact, content and processes of the curriculum would be particularly useful due to the planned expansion of WBL across the university and the variety of modes of WBL that could be developed and integrated into other programmes.

External dissemination of the results has already been made in two conference presentations (see Appendix 10) and other opportunities are in the pipeline. Interest from another university undertaking a JISC[11] project in e-APEL has been shown and part of a joint working project with the Practice Based Learning CETL of the Open University has identified a possible symposium exploring credit weighting of work based projects, which will draw on the volume descriptors from this project. These are evidence of the potential professional contributions for the WBL and APEL community, as discussions about the amounts of learning undertaken by learners in learning contracts or through APEL claims or WBL projects are of interest to a range of practitioners. It is also a contribution to the debate regarding propositional, vocational and practical knowledge (Jarvis, 1999).

Internally, dissemination of the findings and proposals for volume descriptors have been shared with colleagues and the Board of Studies, which included student representation. Having introduced several outputs from the project into the module resource pack, all advisers have been made aware of the changes within the pack from

[11] Joint Information Systems Committee. JISC's activities support education and research by promoting innovation in new technologies and by the central support of ITC services.

the beginning of the new semester in Autumn 2007. All advisers in the UK and overseas campuses will be informed of the changes to ensure that they access the new learning materials and support guides, both in hard copy and electronically. Only through use will academics be able to internalise the new learning activities. The facilitators guide includes a number of useful questions to ask of claimants to assist them in creating RAL claims because, as Brookfield (1987) notes, using questions develops skills of critical reflection and inquiry.

To assist claimants in using both the level and volume descriptors, and to increase the number of credit points for the undergraduate RAL module as part of the university's introduction of a new learning framework, an extended learning activity has been incorporated into the undergraduate resource pack. This includes an analytic activity that requires engagement with, and demonstration of understanding and application of, the level and volume descriptors (see Appendix 11), thus demonstrating the practical application of the new volume descriptors and deconstructed level descriptors. The action plan that has been added to the formative assessment scheme can be used as a means of monitoring claimant understanding and progress at an early stage in the module. Where claimants have difficulties in understanding the concepts under discussion, or need practice in analysing their learning, Race (1999) suggests that the use of flexible or open learning can be particularly helpful. Providing well structured formative feedback early on in the semester enables students to develop their thinking and critical learning skills, and formative feedback should motivate students and enable the development of learning skills (Knight, 2002) that last for the duration of the programme and thereafter.

Table 5.1: Project Objectives and Evidence of Achievement

Objective	Achievement
1. Undertake a literature search and extensive reading around APEL.	Achieved: used to support literature review in Chapter Two and compilation of student questionnaire and academics' questions.
2. Investigate undergraduate WBL students' experiences when compiling a Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (RAL) claim.	Achieved: data gained from the students' questionnaires and reflective essays.
3. Explore the impact of accreditation upon students' work and study programme.	Achieved: findings from the student questionnaire and interviews suggested that a good accreditation outcome had a positive effect on student progression.
4. Explore the skills and techniques used by facilitators and assessors of the RAL module.	Achieved: academic interviews presented a range of questions, skills and techniques used by facilitators.
5. Create teaching and learning resources to support facilitators of the RAL module.	Achieved: teaching and learning resources developed and student information included in resource packs. Academic information compiled in a facilitators' pack.
6. Develop criteria for assessing general credit volume in RAL claims.	Achieved: criteria identified and trialled through assessment period.
7. Introduce the teaching and learning resources and assessment criteria for RAL into current practice within WBL programmes.	Achieved: see objective 5. Unintended outcome included a revision of the whole RAL module resources for postgraduate students also.
8. Disseminate findings within the wider community of accreditation practitioners.	Partially achieved: externally, two conference presentations already given, and more planned in 2008 together with planned publications. Internally, an APEL audit is planned in conjunction with the Admissions Office in 2008.

Project Limitations

This project has been constrained by several factors. The inclusion of only approximately 25% of student respondents within an academic year's cohort and not including claimants in the following action research cycles restricted the application of findings to other student bodies and reduced the potential significance of the

questionnaire findings. These numbers are fairly unrepresentative of the student population, although they offered some feedback about the programme which can be utilised for future developments. Whilst the numbers were few, they were a fairly standard representation of a survey approach, and since the questionnaire has been devised, it could be used again to undertake a wider survey of WBL students. The degree of collaboration with the claimants was limited, but the data generated from each cycle contributed to resources and will benefit many more students in the future. Ideally, a greater degree of collaboration with claimants would have strengthened the findings. Consequently, a larger evaluation of the WBL programme is indicated. This also indicates a limited generalisability to other situations.

Collegial involvement was, by necessity, pragmatic and expedient and therefore the degree of collaboration, especially within a research approach that expects collaborative activities, was less influential than initially hoped for. The range of experience represented by the academics included those who have worked for a number of years across all academic levels and this was the first attempt at gathering the tacit knowledge of all the WBL practitioners, many of whom in the past were very involved with the undergraduate programme. However, pragmatically, this project had to be undertaken within my workplace and work time, and awareness of external pressures on colleagues had to be catered for, as well as retaining a working relationship with them when the project had finished. Whilst the amount of active participation by the academics was more limited than originally hoped, this reflects the real life nature of the project, where one had to make the most of any data generating opportunity available and maximise the output from it. The lack of common philosophical understanding supporting APEL within my work environment demonstrates the need for further research, enquiry and opportunities to explore the epistemological underpinnings of our WBL practice.

Reflections on the Project Process and Being an Insider Researcher

Doing an action research project within one's own organisation means that one has committed to learning in action. As an insider researcher, there are three types of research approach which Coghlan and Brannick (2005) identify as being relevant to

this process. The first is that of first person research: using the personal and professional pre-understanding of organisational knowledge (i.e. research for oneself). The second is that of second person research where one is working on practical issues of concern to the organisation by working collaboratively with colleagues (i.e. research for the organisation), and the third is that of generating understanding and theory extrapolated from the experience (i.e. for the wider academic community). These three positions influence the process and products from the project, as the immediate outcomes are for the organisation and their 'clients' (i.e. claimants), whereas the personal and professional outcomes take somewhat longer and are bounded by, amongst other things, academic gatekeepers of doctoral assessment processes. Likewise, the benefits to the academic community emerge later, once the outcomes have been peer reviewed and accepted as credible.

As a first and second person researcher, this project was distinct from but contributory to the CEWBL activity on APEL as a whole, and therefore defined by Coghlan and Brannick (2005) as an organistic-oriented study and action inquiry designed to improve professional practice, involving self-reflection and examining personal and organisational assumptions and ways of thinking, and acting as part of the research process. When writing the project report, I began to examine my own assumptions more closely with regard to contributing to the data, as the report writing process is an essential part of reflection upon the action research activity. My role in the CEWBL offered the opportunity to undertake a project that would complement the work of the CEWBL and be relevant to the development of WBL practice. My previous experience within WBL equipped me with the pre-understanding of the organisation, the tacit and explicit knowledge, insights and experience of organisational dynamics, culture, relationships and political factions (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005), as well as the WBL programme components and student and staff needs. The disadvantage is that it can be possible to be so close that the obvious is invisible, and I may assume too much and not probe far enough. Coghlan and Brannick (2005) warn that the insider knowledge may only be partial, and certainly at the beginning of the project my knowledge was more of the HSSc than of the mainstream WBL due to my original location, but this has changed over the two years of the project and my political knowledge and that of the culture in which I am working has grown significantly.

I became aware early on in the CEWBL that my position, both as a worker and researcher, was one of 'piggy in the middle', where I was caught between the two WBL centres - that of the NCWBLP and of the HSSc, as well as positioned by prestige in the CEWBL. Additionally, in another dimension as a student and as a member of staff, registered for the doctorate in NCWBLP, I was positioned on a similar hierarchical level, by virtue of my position in the CEWBL, as several senior colleagues. Consequently, my position as a worker researcher was challenging in several ways. Whilst academia purports to be collegial, often it is hierarchical, especially in relation to academic qualifications (Thomas, 2002). My immediate colleagues were not only more senior than I, in terms of experience of WBL and more knowledgeable in the field of study, but also were all supervisors of the doctorate programme I was studying on, and this included my personal supervisor. This could suggest that I was ideally placed to pursue my project, with people around to support and guide me through the process. However, there were times when I felt very exposed when trying to actively promote my project and gaining cooperation from others, and times when I felt very inexperienced, especially when seeking knowledge of doctoral processes or advice, as it was taken for granted that I would know because of my position and familiarity with WBL. I found it very difficult to seek academic direction from my colleagues as I was aware of the internal pressures upon them, but also I felt that I lacked objectivity and I needed to find an external consultant who, I hoped, could help me to see a wider perspective and gain some distance from the department. This I was fortunate enough to find and it did enable me to develop some objectivity.

As the assumed CEWBL 'expert' in RAL I had power, but this was power without authority as I had no method of involving colleagues other than by their goodwill and my powers of persuasion; a tricky combination, as the outcome cannot be guaranteed. I was able to engage the majority of senior and experienced colleagues in interviews to gather their tacit knowledge of the RAL process, but my positionality did, I think, mean that perhaps I did not pursue trains of thought or propositions as I might have done had I been less knowledgeable about WBL practices, and therefore I probably made assumptions about meanings and viewpoints. Also, where colleagues cooperated on their own terms, for example in not blind assessing the AOLs I had

asked them to, but in giving their time for an interview, I felt unable to be assertive and request the additional data from colleagues and was more likely to accept whatever they did give me, whether it met my purposes or not. In terms of academic leadership and project management, this was not an assertive approach, and probably in an external organisation it would have been easier to pursue my requests and to engage with staff on a different level altogether, one of more equality. My role in the CEWBL had an authority which my role as insider researcher did not, but which helped in gaining access and cooperation in many respects. Edwards (1999) suggests that trust and rapport are of great significance for the insider researcher, which I think I used unconsciously initially during the project, and later consciously during the end stages of the project.

This then, was the culture into which I have been trying to introduce change, through collaboration and involvement of others, and trying to exert academic leadership, despite the difficulties of role duality, role conflict and limited authority. Ramsden (1998) says that academic leadership is about learning, which Antonacopoulou and Bento (2004) also describe as learning to be a good follower in order to be a good leader. They argue that learning to lead requires reflection and reconsideration of what one knows, thus one develops and is developed by others in order to become a learning facilitator. I am aware that I can facilitate others, whether it is through learning academically or from experience, whether that be practical, academic or spiritual. As a friend commented at one point when I was stuck in a stalemate position as 'piggy in the middle'; "*you who can facilitate others, still have to learn to facilitate yourself"*, which made me realise that only I could find a way through, and I had to be patient to wait for the right opportunity in order to move forward. Fretting over the frustrations was negatively colouring my attitudes and I needed to grasp a different perspective altogether.

As a good team member I am trustworthy, loyal and capable of doing the job (Ramsden, 1998), but it is difficult to raise questions or challenge current practice when that is not the usual approach taken by colleagues. The need to be a good follower and support senior colleagues is appropriate when working in an academic team, but these qualities could be misconstrued as fawning for favours which is not my preferred approach. As Ramsden (1998) comments, the more adept that one

becomes as an effective follower, the more scope one has for dissent and challenge on other occasions, but it is a difficult path to tread when wanting to stir one's peers into reviewing practice and challenging assumptions, or when rejecting passivity and reluctant compliance and instead, trying to stimulate active, interventionist challenges to the status quo. I think that perhaps my frustrations were more to do with the situation within the department rather than the project, but the one influences the other, and can overshadow it. In terms of importance, my project dropped steadily downwards as other factors took precedence in WBL, which made it difficult to raise and promote in meetings when far more crucial matters were pressing.

I think the change in priorities felt more acute due to a number of institutional changes being proposed at the time, including the creation of a WBL Institute, with a whole new *modus operandi*, which had the effect of distracting the senior team from the main task in hand within the CEWBL and, to some extent, within WBL. I observed that there is a culture of centralised power in WBL which, I think, has resulted in a tendency by colleagues to comply reluctantly in times of change (Ramsden, 1998), rather than wholeheartedly adopting innovations or initiating anything new from among the staff team. I can fully understand this, as diktats of change from the top down tend to result in staff adapting that which must be changed and tinkering with as little as possible in order to limit the damage to themselves (Ramsden, 1998), particularly within resource limitations. I noted a reluctance of involvement in other projects that were essential for the WBL department so, realistically, to get any kind of favourable response to my project, even briefly, should be considered as positive.

This is also a good example of where my role conflicts as a researcher and insider with differing priorities to my colleagues, as my role in the organisation competes with that of researcher wanting to pursue my research interests (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005), thus creating a role duality. However, a positive note was that the opportunity to do this project came at the right time in my career and allowed me to combine my role in the CEWBL with that of researcher, which would have been far more difficult in my previous role. In terms of the organisation, the CEWBL role, together with the project, has placed me in a wider political sphere than previously possible and that has enabled me to access information, support and resources. This

has meant that I have had to assess the power and interests of the stakeholders (superiors, claimants and colleagues) and determine the type of relationship necessary to ensure good relationships during the project (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005) and to foster successful outcomes. I had to balance that with maintaining confidentiality of information and ensure that my colleagues were not identifiable by any distinguishing comments, or exposed in publications. This has meant that protecting aspects (such as colleagues' gender) has been considered so that nothing can be linked specifically to any individual, even if it is uncontentious, as I owe it to my colleagues to protect their trust in me.

Other ethical considerations relate to the collaborative nature of action research, which incorporates participation from others and requires authentic relationships with them (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). Apart from confidentiality and anonymity, I had to consider whether collegial contributions would have unforeseen political consequences, and how informed their consent would need to be if this had developed into a more in-depth social participatory action research project, with radical or challenging changes of practice. In fact, the participatory nature of the project was very limited, which probably stems from the fact that the change was not anticipated as major, nor was I expecting to orchestrate a transition from one state to another, as the iterative project cycles were to generate data rather than produce change (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). This project and change status reflects the observation at the beginning of the project, that there was not a perceived problem with the RAL process, but exploration would and indeed should, surface any areas suitable and ripe for development and improvement, but did not necessarily mean that change was imperative.

In terms of my learning from the project, I have found how difficult it is to undertake a project in one's own organisation when it is important to oneself, but not essential to the functioning of the department. I had authority from my position in the CEWBL, but I had no authority to make anyone participate, accept or adopt the project findings. I have learnt that undertaking a course of study within one's own department has difficulties of subjectivity, confidentiality and access to objective academic support, which could contribute to personal frustration with the department as a worker, researcher and learner. The results that have emerged are specific to this situation, but

there are opportunities to extrapolate new knowledge for future use in other general situations (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005) and professional interests.

I have learnt that there are some colleagues who I find it difficult to work with in an equal participatory manner, and that I am not as facilitative as I thought I was, whether steering myself through projects or introducing new learning and teaching strategies for others, even resorting to inserting the new information in the RAL module handbooks personally to ensure it was included for all to access in the new academic year's information. However, I have learnt more about my colleagues and their motivations and responses to change, and tried to work in a way that respects, acknowledges and encourages their contributions.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This project has explored the assessment and facilitation practices used in the RAL module in the undergraduate WBL programme, and evaluated the experience of undergraduates on the module. It has followed the development of criteria to assist in the assessment of credit volume within a RAL claim, resulting in several supporting documents for claimants and academics involved in the module. It has been undertaken during the first two years of a larger institution-wide project involving embedding excellent teaching and learning practices as part of the CEWBL across MU. This chapter will summarise the findings of the project, initially in relation to the research questions asked at the outset, and then outline the recommendations that have emerged from the project process. The limitations of the project will be outlined in relation to the chosen research methodology, and suggestions for future research in the field will be considered.

Research Questions

The project was guided by the research questions below and the following conclusions drawn:

1. **How does compiling an accreditation claim affect the undergraduate WBL learner personally, professionally and in his/her potential academic pathway?**

   The RAL module apparently increased claimants' self-esteem and self-confidence in their work and professional lives. Evidence suggests that the claimants saw themselves as becoming more professional through undertaking the WBL degree. There was a conscious recognition of the positive impact that reflection had upon their work and learning, and doing RAL was considered to enhance their ability to learn from work. There seemed to be no consistent correlation between the amount of credit awarded in relation to the numbers of AOLs submitted, which suggests that

improvements in practice to develop a transparent process that links the size, numbers and content of the AOL to the credits awarded, would benefit the claimants through the rest of the WBL experience, as a high credit award was likely to encourage perseverance on the programme. Credit results that claimants were disappointed with appeared to deter progression on the WBL programme, and evidence suggests that claimants who perceived that they got a poor result were inclined to discontinue the programme.

2. What facilitation activities enable the learners to recognise and make their learning explicit within the claim?

Learning was uncovered through the use of several practical activities, such as annotating the CV, feedback from their adviser, looking at examples, talking to colleagues and reflective learning activities such as reviewing evidence. Analysing learning in discrete chunks, together with developing an understanding of academic terminology, also helped. Gaining specific feedback from their adviser, especially being asked specific questions to facilitate reflection on and analysis of their learning, was considered very helpful, as was preparing for an appraisal or personal development plan. There were few comments regarding on-line learning, as claimants did not express an interest in it. However, it should be borne in mind that this research was done in 2005, and that claimants who have since experienced the new VLE may be more positive towards it as a learning tool. The use of a VLE to present examples for critique and analysis might enable claimants to further analyse their learning, although training would be required by both claimants and academics to make effective use of it.

3. What key features of learning within an accreditation claim are recognised by assessors as having the potential for accreditation?

The key features suggesting significant learning in the AOLs identified specific learning incidents or activities which clearly demonstrated a process of learning. Assessors' comments on claimants' draft work identified aspects such as how a piece of evidence was created, or asking questions of the claimant to elaborate upon the component parts of an activity. Occasionally the claimant made almost offhand comments about their achievements or practice that indicated to the academic that there was implicit learning there, but which the claimant took for granted, needing

the academic to draw attention to it for reflection and analysis, especially when the claimant emphasised the 'doing' rather than the learning. Additional suggestions included requesting the rationale and knowledge behind decisions made, or how and why other practitioners were involved, or seeking more information to make the learning self-evident. Experienced academics were able to see learning potential within a claim and make practical suggestions for improvement (see Appendix 9).

4. How do facilitators identify and recognise volumes and levels of credit when assessing the areas of learning?

Generally, it appeared that facilitators used previous experience of working with standard university modules to guide them in their assessment of credit amounts. Credits may have been awarded in relation to the facilitator equating learning to a standard module size, or a WBL project of 20, 30, 40 or 60 credits. There was some notice taken of training time, but evidence of the time that an individual had spent learning over months or years was emphasised, together with the way they articulated how their knowledge had developed during that period. Good presentation and effective use and selection of evidence could also influence accreditation decisions. Specific links between amounts of credit and individual volume criteria was not possible at this stage, but characteristics of a good claim were identified and included in the claimants' guidance (see Appendix 8). The use of theory to support learning in any area was not expected by academics within a claim, although if included and referenced correctly was considered to improve the claim as it demonstrated depth in the claimant's knowledge.

5. Are there common themes and types of learning and knowledge from work that emerge for accreditation from undergraduate WBL learners?

Eight themes were identified within the claims, of which four represented the key graduate skills: ICT, transferable skills, teamwork and communication. This confirms that the RAL claims of WBL students reflect specific skills gained from work as identified in the graduate key skills (Dearing, 1997). The other four themes related to specific work that individuals did; for example teaching and education was very common, reflecting the predominant job origins of the claimants as well as their roles in training junior colleagues. Subject discipline learning (i.e. related to their professional or occupational roles) was also included, as was managing

projects or administration, both of which tend to be transdisciplinary work skills. The final theme of pastoral work included managing behaviour and counselling, and could relate to providing a stable work environment in which individuals can perform. The distribution of these categories might change slightly, depending on the claimants' occupations and work roles, but several of the themes are consistent with key graduate skills.

6. What information is useful for academics and claimants to know when compiling an accreditation claim?

There was a wide range of information gathered that contributed to the creation of guidance for RAL facilitators (see Appendix 9) and claimants (see Appendix 8), but similar features were to be found in both. In brief, the guidance provided aimed to assist both parties to:

- evaluate RAL claims and identify areas for reflection, analysis, description of learning, and further development through the use of exemplars and questioning;
- use a framework in order to assess credit volume;
- scope a structure in which to plan, compile, enhance or evaluate an AOL;
- identify appropriate questions to ask either of themselves or of others in order to reveal tacit learning;
- recognise limitations and apply specific elements within a claim to enhance credit capability; and
- acknowledge and appreciate the influence of contexts in which learning occurs and the consequent implications for aspects of learning and/or supporting evidence.

These elements that assist claimants and academics are being disseminated internally through teaching and learning materials across MU as part of the CEWBL strategy to embed excellence in teaching and learning from WBL into other areas. This has been achieved by locating the written guidance in a learning repository that has been acquired as part of the CEWBL activities. The guidance will also be available to staff in hard copy. RAL extracts from claimants will be used on the VLE as examples for

others to critique and discuss. Externally, the criteria will be disseminated through conference venues such as SEEC and UVAC, where there is already understanding of the nature of APEL and other publications, such as peer-reviewed articles to contribute to the body of knowledge concerning APEL. The CEWBL offers a vehicle for future dissemination to other interested parties and may contribute to other developments in WBL and accreditation in ways that are not yet apparent. The wider impact on the profession will be through publications and conference presentations, but I hope there will be further influences upon the range of uses of APEL within HE, hopefully starting in MU across the schools as part of the work of the CEWBL.

Limitations of the Research Approach

Using an action research approach to investigate practice with the intention of involving others and improving practice is a suitable strategy to introduce and manage change in a workplace (Waterman *et al*., 2001). As the RAL module had not been perceived to be a problem initially, engaging others was challenging at times, depending on their perceptions of the issue. The notion of exploring something for its intrinsic value and interest and learning from the process, resonates with both the philosophy of WBL (Costley, 2000) and action research (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002). In this case, it provided a valuable opportunity to scrutinise practice within a specific WBL context, and was future orientated in terms of identifying what we, as a community of practitioners, know about APEL, and what we can contribute to a wider community of practice, which also aligns to the intention of the CETLs to deliver substantial benefits to students, teachers and institutions (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/tinits/cetl/).

Engaging colleagues in order to empower them was not as influential as I had hoped, although some were more empowered than others to introduce parallel changes in the facilitation of RAL. Resistance to change is not new, and the degree to which it affects change implementation depends on the team confidence and cohesion. Local changes in structure and hierarchy of WBL contributed some uncertainty and unsettled colleagues, so that the readiness for change was not as open as it might have

been. However, these structural changes may now provide a fertile soil for new approaches to practice, of which this project can be considered a forerunner.

The project's outputs will influence all the future students in WBL, and may encourage colleagues to research other areas of tacit knowledge that we take for granted, in order to contribute to the wider body of knowledge in WBL. The outputs of the project contributed both propositional and practical knowledge (Eraut, 1994) to our practice, and these will continue to be generated, refined and applied through practice (Waterman *et al*., 2001).

Recommendations

This project has provided an opportunity for extensive consideration of the way the RAL module runs and the impact that a few amendments could have upon a whole programme. As such, it has revealed a number of possible CEWBL projects that could be undertaken next academic year, and indicated some long-term development plans to enhance the WBL programme.

The following recommendations have arisen from a review of the findings and are summarised below. Since completing this project I have been appointed as Director of the CEWBL and therefore will have direct oversight of any activity that arises from these recommendations.

1. WBL information literature and course handbooks should be revised to ensure that course demands are made explicit and are realistic, together with explicit information about amount and form of academic and programme support available to claimants. These expectations should be mirrored in information given to WBL academics to ensure consistency of message. To be undertaken by the CEWBL by June 2008.

2. It should be acknowledged within the information that WBL does not suit all students and that some would fare better with formal taught courses. Some of

this will be on-going during the first year of the new WBL Institute. To be undertaken by the CEWBL by June 2008.

3. The volume descriptors have been introduced into the new academic year resources and their impact upon claimants' submitted work and understanding of the RAL requirements, as well as academics use and application of the volume descriptors, will need to be evaluated at the end of the academic year by the CEWBL. This will need to include the use of RAL exemplars as used by both claimants and academics, and evaluation of RAL claims as to whether there are more successful first time claims as a result of using the amended learning materials. The CEWBL will undertake this as part of its research activities. To be completed by October 2008.

4. The assessment of RAL portfolios should include moderation and/or collaborative marking of a greater percentage of submitted portfolios, up to 20-25%. Following discussions within the subject group, it is proposed that this be included as part of a staff development programme by the CEWBL for all staff assessing RAL claims. The CEWBL will undertake this in conjunction with the Directors of Programmes, who were newly appointed in March 2008, so will extend this across the assessment periods of both summer 2008 and spring 2009.

5. The academic judgements determining volume and level of credits should be clearly identified in feedback to the claimant, so that the process is more transparent to the claimant, to other advisers and external assessors. This too will be included in staff development sessions facilitated by the CEWBL. To be undertaken as in Number 4.

6. Further information around reflective practice, use of reflective models and tools, and written examples that reflect the different subject areas and cultures of WBL students should be developed and made available for claimants and academics. This has been identified as an area for development through academic projects in conjunction with the CEWBL. This work will be commissioned by the CEWBL to be ready for the new academic year: 2008-09.

7. MU's approach to APEL should explore its philosophical, pedagogical and theoretical basis from which to contribute to the wider debate around APEL. I recommend that these issues be addressed during the lifetime of the CEWBL, and further research and publications should demonstrate our wealth of knowledge, skills, expertise and understanding of APEL to a wider audience. The CEWBL will undertake this during its lifetime, during the final two academic years of the CEWBL in 2009-10, and undertaken as part of the CEWBL research activities.

8. The use and current hindrances to APEL within schools pan-university will be audited as a starting point from which to develop the practice of APEL in the widening participation and access agenda. Part of the CEWBL strategy should include ways to overcome current barriers in the use of APEL and to facilitate its increased uptake across the university. An APEL audit is being planned by the CEWBL in conjunction with the main admissions department of MU and will be achieved by September 2008. Findings will inform future staff development in APEL across MU.

9. A survey of WBL students should be undertaken to investigate their preferred modes of teaching delivery, including out of routine work hours and/or the use of distance and blended teaching resources, resulting in adjustments to our WBL programmes, in order to make our programmes more student centred. This, together with objective 10, has been devised by the CEWBL researcher and Director and is being undertaken during the winter and spring terms of 2008.

10. A complete evaluation of the student experience of WBL should be undertaken including its impact in the workplace, and any learning developments that students consider would enhance it in order for new ideas to be incorporated into the next new curriculum. Findings will be incorporated into new programmes to be developed as part of a wider strategy of using WBL within MU.

Future Research

Future research possibilities are various and are drawn initially from the recommendations, particularly regarding evaluation of the student experience of WBL and the impact on their workplace and career. Epistemological explorations of the theoretical and philosophical foundations of WBL and our approach to practice would be most appropriate, especially in relation to development of a wider understanding of APEL and WBL practice. Other explorations of teaching and learning approaches and strategies would be advantageous to other APEL and WBL practitioners and academics. It is hoped that this project, when disseminated, will raise questions for others and offer enough intrigue to stimulate new research and investigation.

Conclusion

This project has recorded the process of undertaking an action research project over a period of two years. It has captured aspects of facilitation and assessment practice commonly used when teaching APEL in the undergraduate WBL curriculum, and the processes by which criteria to assess credit volume have been generated. As an insider researcher, undertaking the project in my own sphere of practice and amongst colleagues, the project has raised issues of leadership, power and authority whilst facilitating changes in practice as being essential in order to achieve the intended project outcomes. It is also apparent that principles of good teaching and learning apply to any subject discipline to enable the learner to maximise their learning experience. It is hoped that this project will pave the way for good teaching and learning experiences to be consistent through the WBL programme.

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Appendix 1 Glossary and Abbreviations Used

Assessment criteria:	Descriptions of what a learner is expected to do, in order to demonstrate that learning outcomes have been achieved
Academic	HE tutor who advises, facilitates or assesses an APEL claimant
APEL	Accreditation (or assessment) of prior experiential learning
APL	Accreditation of Prior (certificated) Learning
AOL	Area of Learning
AOLs	Areas of Learning
BoS	Board of Studies
CAEL	Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning
CAQDAS	Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis
CATS	Credit Accumulation Transfer System. A system which enables learners to accumulate credit, and which facilitates the transfer of that credit within and beyond the providing institution
CETL	Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning
CEWBL	Centre for Excellence in Work Based Learning
Claimants	Learners undertaking an APEL claim
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
Credit	A quantified means of expressing equivalence of learning.

Credit level	An indicator of the relative demand, complexity and depth of learning and of learner autonomy
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DfES	Department for Education and Skills – the previous name of the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS)
FE	Further Education
General Credit	General Credit is awarded for learning demonstrated by the claimant, and does not have to demonstrate an exact match with taught programmes.
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HSSc	School of Health and Social Sciences
JD	Job Description
JISC	Joint Information Systems Committee
Learning Outcome	A statement of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/ or be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning
Level descriptors	The level of complexity, relative demand and autonomy expected of a learner on completion of a unit of programme of learning
MISIS	Middlesex Integrated Student Information System
MU	Middlesex University
Module	A self-contained, formally structured, learning experience with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria
NARIC	National Recognition and Information Centre
NCWBLP	National Centre of Work Based Learning Partnerships
Notional learning time:	The number of hours which it is expected a learner at a particular level will spend, on average, to achieve the specified learning outcomes at this level
PG	Postgraduate
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

RAL	Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (module)
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
Specific Credit	Specific Credit matches specific learning outcomes from programmes which the claimant has chosen to demonstrate s/he has the equivalent learning from a source other than through taught programmes in the University
SEEC	Southern England Education Consortium
UG	Undergraduate
UVAC	University Vocational Advisory Council
UALL	Universities Association of Lifelong Learning
Volume Descriptors	Guidance for learners to enable them to express the amount of their learning
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment
WBL	Work Based Learning
WBLAU	Work Based Learning and Accreditation Unit (in the HSSc)
WHAT	WHAT cycle of reflection

Appendix 2 Letter to Invite Participants & Student Consent Form

Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Work Based Learning
Middlesex University Trent Park Campus, Bramley Rd, Enfield, N14 4YZ

October 2005

Dear

I am writing to invite you to take part in a research study which is investigating students' experience of accreditation. You have been invited to participate because you submitted a RAL portfolio during the last academic year (2004/05) as part of your work based learning undergraduate programme.

The purpose of the enclosed questionnaire is to find out your experiences as a student during the Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (RAL) module. It will help the National Centre for Work Based Learning Partnerships improve the accreditation process and understand both the learning and assessment processes of accreditation more fully. It is part of an action research study which will include analysis of some examples of work from RAL portfolios and reflective essays, so we would like your permission to use some of your student work as part of our research and would like you to send us an example from your RAL claim by email.

We are also exploring how accrediting your learning affects your work role and teaching strategies that you found helpful while you compiled your portfolio. We hope to use the information to improve our student resources and to create staff development materials.

This study is part of the work of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) which is closely linked to the National Centre for Work Based Learning Partnerships and the Work Based Learning and Accreditation Unit in the School of Health and Social Sciences. It will also be used by Barbara Workman as part of her Doctorate in Professional Studies.

If you would like to take part in the study please complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it, together with a copy of the enclosed consent form in the stamped addressed envelope by the **30th November 2005**.
We would also like you to send to us by the **30th November 2005**:

- an electronic copy of your reflective essay, and/ or
- an electronic copy of an area of learning

Sending these copies to us will mean that you agree to their use as part of our research project. We would like electronic copies so that we can store them in a data base and use them as examples of accreditation for future students and staff.
Please send them to: b.workman@mdx.ac.uk

Your contribution is completely voluntary and with no further obligation. Your future study will not be affected and your identity will be kept confidential. We will make the examples anonymous so that you will not be recognised, and you will not be identifiable in any publication that is written as a result of this research.

If you have any questions about this research or your contribution to it, please contact me by phone 0208 411 6929, or email: b.workman@mdx.ac.uk,
Thank you for your contribution. We welcome all your comments.
Yours sincerely, Barbara Workman

Participant Information and Consent Form

Title of project: **Recognition and accreditation of work based learning in the undergraduate curriculum: investigating the participants' experience of the accreditation process.**

Please read the information letter carefully. If you are happy to contribute to this research study please sign both copies of the enclosed consent form and return one copy with the completed questionnaire in the self addressed envelope. All replies will be kept separate from the questionnaire to protect your identity.

You may choose whether to take part or not. If you would like to take part you may wish to keep a copy of the signed consent form. If you change your mind and decide not to take part you may withdraw at any time without giving a reason by contacting the researcher. Your decision whether to be involved or not will not affect the rest of your study programme in any way.

1. I confirm that I have read the letter dated October 2005 for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

3. I agree that any electronic copies of my work that I send may be used for research, teaching and learning purposes

4. I agree to take part in the study

Name of participant: Date

Signature:

Main researcher contact details:
Barbara Workman 0208 411 6929 b.workman@mdx.ac.uk

Thank you very much for your contribution

Please return this in the envelope provided to: B.Workman Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Work Based Learning, NCWBLP, Middlesex University, Trent Park, Bramley Rd, Enfield N14 4YZ

Office use only

Appendix 3 Questionnaire

MIDDLESEX UNIVERSITY, WORK BASED LEARNING

RECOGNITION AND ACCREDITATION OF LEARNING MODULE

We would like to find out more about your experience of making a RAL claim as part of your academic programme.
Please complete this questionnaire as fully as possible. It should only take about 15 minutes.

We welcome all your comments and appreciate your contribution. Thank you for completing this.

1. When did you complete the RAL Module?.....

(Date)

2. Which module did you do? (Please tick)

WBS 2802 WBS 1002

3. Please can you list the titles of your areas of learning/ module titles:
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

4. Please state which **main skills or knowledge**, from your portfolio that **you** consider to be **most important** to have accredited and recognised
1
2
3
4
5
6

5. How many credits were you awarded for your RAL claim? …….

6. Since completing your portfolio, there may be ways in which the RAL process has affected your work and personal learning. Please indicate to what extent you agree/ disagree with the following statements: (Please tick)

6a. I have increased confidence in my knowledge at work

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

6b. I am aware of the importance of my knowledge at work

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

6c. As a result of RAL I have changed my approach to some aspects of work

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

6d. I have not changed the way I think about my knowledge at work

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

6e. I am more aware of the range of skills I use at work

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

6f. I now recognise the depth of my work knowledge

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

6g. I reflect on aspects of my work practice more now

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

Learning style

Please consider if your approach to learning has been affected by undertaking the RAL module and indicate by ticking the appropriate response:

7a. My approach to learning has changed

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

7b. I always considered my learning style to be reflective

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

7c. I am more able to study on my own

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

7d. Doing the RAL claim has made no difference to the way I learn

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

7e. I can now see new skills available to learn at work for myself

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

7f. Opportunities to extend my knowledge are more noticeable now

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

7g. Learning through work has not changed for me

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

7h. I can see learning opportunities for others at work

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

7i. I think my learning style is more reflective now

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

8. Can you give an example of recognising a learning opportunity at work for yourself,
which you might not have recognised prior to doing the claim?

Identifying your learning for your RAL claim

9. Please identify how much each of the following activities helped you to identify your learning?

	Very helpful	Some help	No help	Did not use
a. Reading the resource pack				
b. Preparing my CV				
c. Tutorial with my academic advisor				
d. Talking to colleagues at work				
e. Looking at examples				
f. Keeping a diary				
g. Drawing mind maps				
h. Use of reflective model, e.g Kolb, Boud et al				
i. Using Oasis Web CT				
j. Sending in drafts for my advisor to comment on				
k. Other e.g?				

10. Can you describe any one particular activity **not** listed above that helped you to uncover your learning?

11a. What aspects of RAL did you find particularly difficult to do when making your claim?

11b. How did you overcome this difficulty?

12. If you had access to on-line support (e.g. Web CT) during the RAL module, what sort of activities do you think you would find helpful when preparing your claim?

13. Have you changed your job since completing a RAL claim?

Yes/ No

13a. If yes, was this a promotion?

Yes/ No

13b. Did undertaking RAL module influence your decision to change job?

Yes/ No

14. Any other comments or observations you would like to make about doing RAL?

Thank you for your help Barbara Workman

Please return this by the **30th November 2005**

Please return this in the envelope provided to: B.Workman Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Work Based Learning, NCWBLP, Middlesex University, Trent Park, Bramley Rd, Enfield N14 4YZ

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Appendix 4 Assessing a RAL Claim – Guidelines for Assessors and Interview Schedule

Assessing a RAL claim

I shall give you three pieces of undergraduate AOLs that have all been previously awarded credit, although neither of us will know how much or at what level.
When we meet for an interview I shall ask you the specific questions as listed below. Please feel free to annotate the hard copies and to make comments on them to help you remember what your thinking was as you read them.

1. When first assessing an AOL how do you go about it?

2. What features in this AOL indicates to you that learning is present and could be developed further?

3. When assessing this AOL what features give you ideas as to its level and volume of credit?

4. How much credit and at what level would you award this? Can you explain why?

5. Are you able to point to anything in this AOL that demonstrates a good example of explaining learning?

6. Can you identify places where there was potential for a student to have elaborated further and consequently improved their claim in terms of level or volume of credit? What kind of further elaboration would you be looking for?

7. What do you look for in a piece of evidence?

Interview questions:

1. Can you explain to me how you introduce recognising experiential learning to a student and how you explain making it explicit in a claim?

2. How do you assist a student to identify their areas of learning? Where do you draw clues about potential AOLs from?

3. How do you assist a student to analyse their own learning?

4. What strategies do you use to help students uncover their learning? What examples do you use to facilitate making learning explicit?

5. What advice do you give them in relation to amounts of credit – what guidelines do you give them in terms of size or number of AOLs?

6. How might the facilitator /academic advisor role be improved?

Appendix 5 Draft Pilot - RAL Credit Volume Assessment Guide. Summer 2006

Assessor:…….

Please complete one of these forms by ticking the appropriate box for each RAL claim that you assess. These are suggested categories that may help to assess volumes of credit, and are being trialled here.

On completion of assessment please leave in the RAL portfolio for collection. PTO to add any further comments

	Credit volume guide Please indicate the number and levels of credits you have awarded for each AOL in the right hand columns	Please tick if these helped your assessment in any AOL	**Aol 1**	**Aol 2**	**Aol 3**	**Aol 4**	**Aol 5**	**Aol 6**
1	Recognition of incremental learning over a period of years	0-2 yrs						
		2-5 yrs						
		>5 yrs						
2	Acknowledgement of incremental experience in the area	Breadth						
		Ascending						
3	Equates to similar learning **product** as for a credited module	10 credit						
		20 credits						
		30 credits						
		40 credits						
		> 40						
4	The area of learning is analysed in components that reflect or are equivalent to/ or suggest learning outcomes (LO)	0-3 LO						
		4-6 LO						
		7-8 LO						
		>8 LO						
5	Assessed using a range of credit levels that recognises underpinning knowledge/ skills required to demonstrate learning at more than one level, and **may be implicit** in the claim	L 1						
		L 2						
		L 3						
		L 4						

	Credit volume guide		**AoI 1**	**AoI 2**	**AoI 3**	**AoI 4**	**AoI 5**	**AoI 6**
6	Assessors' awareness of total number of credits required from claim divided between AOLs to reflect overall student learning activity							
7	Reflecting formal training / education hours; (9hrs = 1 credit , 180 hrs = 20 credits) as part of the AOL							
8	Other categories?							
9	Any other factors affecting your decision							
10	Any changes to credit amount following moderation?							
	Total credits awarded	L1	L2		L3			

Module assessed (please tick): WBS 2802 WBS 4802

Did these guidelines help your assessment? Yes No Some

Anything of particular use? Please give any feedback about this model to Barbara Workman, and/ or comment overleaf

Appendix 6 Volume Descriptors Evaluation - January 2007

Draft volume descriptors evaluation

Office use

Dear

I have attached the draft volume descriptors (VD) for assessors and claimants to this letter and also sent the full information to you by email. I would like you to help me evaluate this model before it progresses further. Please can you complete the short questionnaire below to give me feedback on the model so far.

No.	Question	Yes	No	Don't Know
1.	Did you refer to these volume descriptors: i. Whilst teaching students last semester? ii. Whilst assessing student work?			
2.	If 'No' was that because: i. You forgot they were there ii. They did not make sense to you iii. You did not need them iv. You didn't have time v. Other …..please explain:			
3.	If you did use them; i. Did you find them helpful? If no explain… ii. Were they clear? If no explain…			
4.	Did you use the credit amount guide?			
5.	Did the credit amount guide you in your assessment decisions?			
6.	Would you use this model again?			
7.	Which VD were most easy to understand? Please circle 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9.			
8.	Which VD's did you not use? Please circle 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9.			
9.	Are there any other VD's you can think of that are not represented here?			
10.	Are there any amendments that need to be made? Please can you annotate the attached examples with any comments about layout, wording etc			
11.	If the VD's were to be included as any part of the RAL module materials where do you think would be the best place to put them? i. Resource pack ii. VLE iii. As handouts iv. Where else?			
12.	Any other comments?			

Thank you very much for your feedback. Please send your completed questionnaire to Barbara Workman by 5/1/07, or as soon after as possible.

(Appendix 6 cont) **Making the most of Credits in a RAL claim**
Assessors Guide

The number of Volume Descriptors represented within a claim can be an approximate guide as to the possible volume of credit. The use of several descriptors does **not** guarantee extra credits. The claimant must be explicit and effectively elaborate within the claim to optimise the credit award. The lower volumes of credit stated in the category table would be appropriate if the descriptors are minimal. Where descriptors have been fully exploited and incorporated into the analysis of learning then more credits may be awarded.

Volume descriptors	**Credit volume guide for assessors**
•	1. Recognition of incremental learning over a period of years, demonstrates broadening or deepening of learning and knowledge over time.
•	2. Similar explicit outcome or product to: • a validated module or • accredited learning activity or • WBL project outcomes
•	3. Presented in sections or components that reflect: Learning outcomes or specific learning incidents
•	4. Makes different academic levels **explicit** within one area of learning. Clearly demonstrates learning and knowledge at more than one academic level within claim, i.e. reflection and analysis of learning and / or consequent impact upon others is clearly evident
•	5. Recognition of formal training/education hours, or qualification older than 5 years (10 hours = 1 credit) (Same training days can only be used once per RAL portfolio)
•	6. Variety of sources of knowledge used and/ or demonstrates Originality/Uniqueness/Creativity
•	7. High quality of evidence presented and annotated appropriately
•	8. Previous claims in similar subject areas set benchmarks and/ or precedence for assessor
•	9. Planned programme and minimum credits required made explicit (e.g. secondary claim)

Guide to assessment for credit volume descriptors per individual Area of Learning

No of descriptors used	Credit amounts possible
1 - 5	5 - 40 credits
4 -7	10 – 50
6 - 9	20 – 60

Variable credit amounts available to allow academic judgement regarding the quality and academic level of claim to determine credit volume awarded per AOL.

(Appendix 6 cont) **Making the most of Credits in your RAL claim**

Summary of Claimants guide

Using the volume descriptors

Ensuring that you use several volume descriptors will help you to maximise the credit from your RAL claim. You must be explicit within each area of learning to optimise the credit award. Not all descriptors will be applicable to every area of learning, but try to use more than one for each of the areas of learning that you claim.

Volume Descriptors	**Credit volume guide**
•	1. Recognition of incremental learning over a period of years, demonstrates broadening or deepening of learning and knowledge over time.
•	2. Similar explicit outcome or product to: • a validated module or • accredited learning activity or • a project
•	3. Presented in sections or components that reflect: Learning outcomes (LO) or Specific learning incidents
•	4. Different academic levels **explicit** within one area of learning. Clearly demonstrates learning and knowledge at more than one academic level within claim, i.e. reflection and analysis of learning and / or consequent impact upon others is clearly evident
•	5. Recognition of formal training / education hours, or qualification older than 5 years. (10 hours = 1 credit) (Same training days can only be used once per RAL portfolio)
•	6. Variety of sources of knowledge used and/ or demonstrates Originality /Uniqueness / Creativity
•	7. High quality of evidence presented and annotated appropriately
•	8. Previous claims in similar subject areas set benchmarks and/ or precedence for assessor
•	9. Planned programme and minimum credits required made explicit (e.g. secondary claim)

When you have drafted your area of learning use these volume and the level descriptors to assess your areas of learning:
Have you analysed your description of learning?
Have you shown how your learning has grown and changed?
Does your evidence show what you learnt?

Appendix 7: Categories and Subcategories From Advisor Interviews

No.	Category	Subcategories	Products
1	Advisor comments	Teaching & learning strategies Use of reflection Questions to find learning Academic terminology	• Guidance for use of volume assessment criteria (appendix x) • Finding areas of learning • Level descriptors explained
2	Student guidance	Technique of presentation of AOLs Reflection and the big picture Using and choosing evidence Use of JD and CV Level descriptors & expectations Numbers of AOLs Student aspirations Assessment/ peer/ self ICT – access and use Writing AOLs Support, Questions to ask Generic and transferable skills	• Student guidance to Finding & writing AOLs, • Claimants guide - Using level and volume descriptors • Student expectations guide
3	Guidance for assessors	Using CVs and Job Descriptions Staff and student expectations Assessment frameworks	• Guidance to advisors for RAL • Annotating CV & JD
4	Assessment	Outcomes Evidence Credit Levels and volume Learning Quality assurance measures	• Recommend: increase collaborative marking for quality purposes • Level descriptors explained

		Assessment process activities	
No	Category	Subcategories	Products
5	Work based learning	Knowledge creation RAL as gatekeeper to WBL programme Use of APEL as whole programme Benefits and barriers to WBL Academic skills needed	• Information about WBL for students • Staff development to use RAL in their programmes
6	Transdisciplinary skills	Key skills/ transferable graduate skills Organisational competences	• Recognition of skills that transfer between work practices • Themes of AoL's
7	Impact of RAL on students	Emotional implications Cathartic	• Transformative learning experiences • Power of reflective learning reported
8	Credit volume	Volume framework Context Job role Numbers of AOLs Realistic and student centred Advisor skills Characteristics of good claims	• Volume descriptors (appendix 9) • Advisor guidance for RAL • Good claims guidance in Finding AOLs (Appendix 10)
9	Level criteria	Level differentiation and justification Academic vocabulary Size of AOL's Characteristics of level criteria	• Level descriptors in accessible language, • Reduce jargon in learning materials
10	ICT	IT literacy Reluctance to use it Need for support for staff & claimants Issues re: feedback, time, development	• Recommend: Invest in VLE student and staff training • Consider on campus training sessions for claimants

No	Category	Subcategories	Products
11	Learning	Questions to find learning Finding AOL's Reflective cycles/ models 'so whatness' Using activities Teaching times Using learning outcomes	• Finding AOL's questions • Recommend: Develop reflective models/ learning activities • Find additional delivery modes/ times to increase accessibility to students
12	Evidence	Using it Narratives and illustrations Illustrating learning Quality Ethics	• Include more guidance in Finding AOL's • Revisit current guidance in RAL handbook
13	Cultural issues	Expectations of students and staff Different academic discourses Learning through reflection Disadvantage students	• Recommend: Develop reflective materials to meet different cultural needs • Make resources accessible • Make staff and student expectations explicit
14	Difficulties	Reflection Different discourses Adviser access/ relationships/ preparation Student suitability for more of learning Accessibility of learning materials	• Use and application of level descriptors • Guidance for reflective learning • Recommend: Review learning materials for accessibility/user friendly
15	Develop RAL	Research Teaching and using the learning framework Advisor/ student guidance and expectations	• Further research of practice • Guidance for advisors and students, increase accessible examples • Make staff /student expectations explicit • Learning communities to support students

Appendix 8 Claimants Guidance

- Level descriptors explained
- Finding areas of learning
- Making the most of your credits

Level Descriptors and assessment criteria
(taken from claimants resource pack)

Work based studies develop certain abilities which aim to make you a more effective work based learner and hence a more capable and insightful individual. The assessment criteria that are used for assessing the RAL claim are directly related to the abilities described below. These criteria are central to work based learning studies and will be used to assess all your work on the WBS programme. These are also called **level descriptors** and you will find that you are expected to develop your work during your programme to reflect them in each module. They are mapped onto the academic levels of undergraduate levels (1, 2 or 3) or postgraduate level (3 or 4) of Middlesex Academic credit scheme. How these are applied at each level isexplained in more detail in the subject handbook (section 12), but the table below indicates what each of these statements mean, so that you can reflect on these as you make your RAL claim.

Programme outcomes: level descriptors
A1* Identification and appropriate use of resources of knowledge and evidence: *select and choose information and evidence from a range of options, justifying your choices and use in your discussion. Different sources of learning such as reading, conferences, in-house training etc can be used to illustrate your learning if you explain how these contributed to your decisions.*
A2* Selection and justification of approaches to task: *provide a reason for your choice of approach to a given situation, and discuss the range of alternatives that may be open to you, demonstrating the range of your underpinning knowledge and understanding.*
A3 Ethical understanding: *apply and interpret a variety of moral codes and ethical practice that direct people's decisions and behaviour, particularly when applied to professional roles, expectations & organisations.*
B1* Analysis and synthesis of information and ideas: *disentangle a variety of elements of an idea and reconstruct and combine them in different ways to demonstrate alternatives or implications of an idea.*
B2* Self appraisal/ reflection on practice: *critically consider your own actions and motives and understand more about how and why, you or others, might think or respond in particular ways, and how these insights might impact upon others.*
B3 Action planning leading to effective and appropriate action: *demonstrate you can plan strategies and interventions that are appropriate for the situation which are supported by relevant knowledge and understanding*
B4* Evaluation of information and ideas: *rigorously weigh alternatives and evidence in order to make reasoned and informed judgements*
C1 Application of learning: *use new learning to inform, develop and/or improve your own or other's practice activities and theoretical understanding*
C2 Effective use of resources: *demonstrate use of sources and/or location of information, knowledge, skills, equipment or materials and personnel that are available and manage them to inform and develop practice for yourself and/or others*

C3 * Effective communication: *communicate in a variety of ways including constructing an appropriate level of academic argument, using correct grammar and syntax to communicate ideas in writing; includes use and application of other modes of communication which may be verbal, physical, performance or profession orientated or artistic etc as appropriate.*
C4 Working and learning autonomously and with others: *demonstrate taking initiative, involving and including others within your sphere of influence and practice.*

* Denotes key abilities that are especially important in the RAL module (pg 57 subject handbook), and therefore when you construct your RAL claim you should try to show how you have taken these things into account at either undergraduate (1,2 & 3) or postgraduate (3 or 4) level, depending on your programme requirements.

Claimant's guide
Finding Areas of Learning
(taken from claimants resource pack)

To claim credit you must compile an 'area of learning'. Areas of learning come from both experience and formal taught learning that you have acquired from a combination of sources, such as training days, experiences from work or voluntary activity, reading or investigating for specific activities such as projects. Sometimes it is not easy to find out where this learning started, but to be able to claim credits it is important to identify it, trace its development, and find the evidence that supports it, so that you can put together a good claim.

Finding areas of learning (AOL)

1. Review your CV and Job description

As you compile and annotate an up to date CV and Job description it is useful to consider the following points:

In your CV

- are there themes emerging, such as teaching, managing, counselling, budgeting or similar?
- What sort of patterns of work activities are reflected in your job changes, promotions or career changes?
- Have you been doing particular types of work such as organising others, managing projects, providing administrative support? If so, where did this learning trail start? Can you see how your choices of work and activity developed particular knowledge and skills further in you?
- Can you explain in your annotated CV how each job built on the previous one?
- Are you involved in particular types of voluntary work or hobbies? If so, are the activities you use for them similar to, or different from the activities you do at work? How did you learn what to do for them?
- What continuous professional development or training have you been involved in?

In your job description

- What are you doing now that you were not doing 5 years ago?
- What new things have you learnt in the last two years?
- What responsibilities do you have at work?
- Have you developed any trans-disciplinary skills e.g. negotiating skills, managing people?
- Have you developed specific skills such as in IT or communication? Did these grow through specific work practices and activities?
- What do you consider to be the routine parts of your work? How did you learn to do them? Did you need formal training or have you developed them over a period of time? Are there many people in your work environment who could do your job? If not, why not?
- Why do people ask your advice? What sort of things do they ask you?

2. Finding titles for your areas of learning

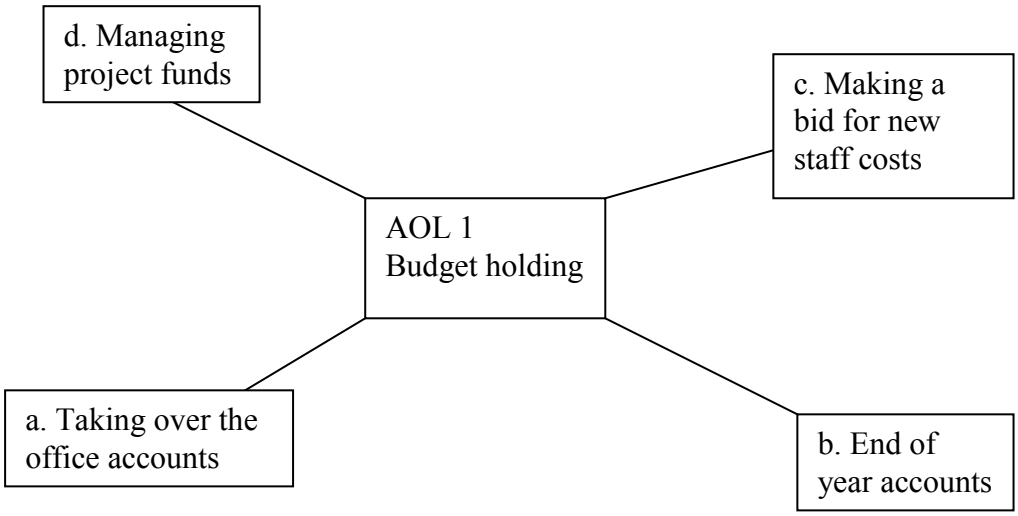
The previous questions will help you identify a preliminary list of areas of learning and some titles may begin to emerge, such as 'managing a budget', 'creating databases', 'working with people'. All titles should be 30 characters (including spaces) or less, and indicate that they are 'doing' words, as you are in the process of acquiring that learning and have not yet learnt it all! Make a list of your titles so far and see where there are overlaps or similarities between titles.

Examples of titles are;
'Managing projects' (17 characters)
'Teaching literacy & numeracy' (28 characters)
'Developing advanced practice' (28 characters)
'Building business relationship' (30 characters)
'Operational management' (22 characters)

3. Developing your ideas for areas of learning

You may now have a number of titles from your CV and JD. You will probably find that some overlap in content or that they complement each other. Now you need to refine your ideas. You will need to think about what will go into each area of learning. There are a number of ways you can do this:-

- **Make a mind map/ spidergram of each title** and identify key learning associated with each title as an off shoot. In the example below you can see that several key points have been identified as contributing to the area of learning.



The example above indicates four key activities that helped this claimant develop their knowledge and learning in 'Budget holding'. She has usefully identified the starting point (a) and so can start to develop the content of the area of learning building upon each of these stages. You may find it helpful to think of these as 'key learning points' or 'learning outcomes', because they express specific outputs that can be expressed as outcomes which are measurable and which may be supported by specific evidence. There are also indications in c & d that there may be other areas of learning that might link or overlap with this one.

For example: Making a bid for new staff might be part of a larger area of learning around managing people, or recruitment and selection. You will have to decide whether you put this learning outcome into this AOL and keep all things financial together, or whether to transfer it into the 'people' focused area of learning. Managing project funds suggests that this person has been running or managing projects and that there may be more learning in an area around project management. You will have to decide as you progress with your areas of learning, how to allocate your evidence and which specific learning outcomes you can emphasize.

- **Identify specific achievements –** you may have a specific example of something that you have accomplished such as; project work, a document you have written or produced, an artefact you have created, some publicity material you have designed. You will be able to use it as evidence too, to support your claim.

By starting with the finished product, you can begin to reflect on the processes that you went through to create it and the learning that you gained from it. You can ask yourself specific questions such as:

- Why did I do this and how did I know how to do it?
- If I did this again how would I do it differently? Why?
- How did I know what to do in this situation? Where had that learning come from?
- Why did I do this in a particular way? What would the consequences be if I did it differently?
- What went well, what went wrong and why?
- Have I done this like this before? Would I do it the same way again? Why?

- **Identify a newly acquired skill or work activity –** this may emerge from reviewing your job description and identifying something that you have had to learn recently from job changes or developments.

You may be starting a new project and are learning the basics of it as you prepare your area of learning. This is an ideal opportunity to keep a learning log over the next few weeks where you record the new things you are learning to add to your claim.

You may find it helpful to review training documentation or other evidence such as minutes of meetings to help you trace the development of learning or, if your routine work is different to other peoples and has grown in a specific direction you may be sought after as an expert on some issues.

To help you find that learning ask the following questions:

- What would someone else need to know to do my job? If I handed it over to someone tomorrow what would they need to know?
- What is the context of my work? How does this influence what I do?
- Are there policies/ legislation/ procedures that I must be acquainted with to practice/ work safely?
- Do I have to address specific types of problems? How do I go about this? How did I learn how to tackle them?
- What specific responsibilities or professional updating must I ensure are included?

4. Developing an area of learning

Once you have identified the area of learning and some of the key points you want to include, this is where the hard thinking and reflection start as you begin to write your learning journey for that area of learning. Writing areas of learning are far more time consuming than you think!
These activities will help:

- Carry a notebook and keep a record of some of the things you do at work during the day.
- Jot down why you made certain decisions, or how you knew what to do in both routine and unusual circumstances – where did that learning come from? Can you provide evidence for it?

- Ask yourself questions such as; what did I learn from that training day? What have I started to do differently because of it?
- Allow yourself lots of time and some quiet to reflect and write out specific learning incidents that come to mind

You may find it helpful to write lots of notes to start with, just to tell the story of how your learning grew over time. Remember, we are interested in **what** you have learnt, **how** you learnt it and the **consequences** of your learning. Be careful not to focus it only on your achievements as it's the 'learning' that we are giving credit for, not the 'doing'. Writing about the key learning points from your mind map, or your specific achievements will help you remember what happened, but you will need to include some analysis of your learning. You will need to write drafts and later edit it, but rather than stare at a blank page it is better to write something, so using key learning points is a good way to get started to describe your learning journey. There are no word limits to areas of learning, but often the good ones will be around 2000 words long. Organising your thoughts clearly and in an orderly manner will be to your advantage as you are likely to gain more credits by doing so, but be careful not to 'waffle on' and miss the focus of your learning.

5. Analysing your learning

Analysing your learning means to explore the different parts that contribute to the whole area of learning and explaining how each part contributes to it. If you are able to interweave how you applied your learning into the narrative and link it to relevant evidence this will also improve your credit rating.

A common difficulty is that claimants describe their learning, but forget to include what the consequence of their learning was; did the organisation work better? Were they more able to do the job? What would they have done differently next time and why? To overcome this, an effective way of showing that you have learnt and understood something is to illustrate how you have used the learning. For example; when you managed a project the first time you did not allow sufficient time for interdependent activities to run alongside it, so when other people's contributions did not come in on time the project deadline was delayed. This means that next time you ran a project, you remembered the difficulties that late contributions made, and so you allowed extra time in your plans. In other words, you have thought through the consequences of your actions; this is sometimes expressed as: "to do X by means of Y to achieve Z". If when you write your area of learning you make sure that you have stated what you have done, why and how and what the outcomes were, it will help you. This will also help you to 'unpack' or 'analyse' the learning and help you to discover a lot of knowledge that you take for granted. Some reflective models (see stage X) also help you to do this, so that the conclusions that are drawn from the learning are made explicit.

If you get stuck and are not sure what to include, look at the level descriptors for the academic level you are trying to gain credits for and think how to include aspects of your learning that reflect these. For example; do you have to make ethical choices? What kind of planning are you involved in? How do you make decisions? How many people are influenced by your work or impacted by your actions? Alternatively you may find that reviewing your evidence and deciding what you needed to know to create the evidence may help you identify your learning.

6. How many areas of learning do I need?

The numbers of areas of learning that are needed depends on the numbers of credits that are required. The more credits needed, the more detail and information that will be required. You may not need more areas of learning, but if you make them as

comprehensive as possible then you may get more credits. Read 'Making the most of your claim' at …… to ensure you maximise the credit from your learning.

7. What does a good accreditation claim look like?

Claims that are good have the following qualities;

- The context in which learning occurs is explicit, and factors affecting the situation are captured without being too descriptive.
- The task or role that was being undertaken is clearly explained and situated within the context and work activity
- When problem solving there is a clear rationale for the choices and decisions made
- Self-awareness is shown, together with an understanding of the implications of one's own and other people's behaviour and actions
- Where appropriate, reference to academic theories or knowledge is included to support decisions and actions, and is referenced accurately using academic conventions
- Learning is shown to be progressive, is built upon and the outcomes explicit
- There is evidence of reflection and analysis within the area of learning
- It is well written, concise, organised and tightly worded
- Evidence is carefully selected, referred to and linked with the narrative, and demonstrates how the learning was used. Where there is limited available evidence, illustrations, such as case studies within the text show how learning was applied and developed.
- Each piece of evidence may be used in several ways to demonstrate different aspects of learning, thus reducing the amount of evidence but showing discrimination towards those pieces that support several aspects of learning.

8. Using Evidence

You may get clues about possible areas of learning from evidence that you have in your work environment. By looking at evidence of your daily work you may be able to gather significant evidence to support your learning just by looking at: letters, emails, minutes of meetings, certificates, products or artefacts, books, articles, policies and procedures.

A few tips about evidence:

- Evidence does not speak for itself so make sure you choose it and use it appropriately, linking it to specific learning outcomes in areas of learning. You can use it more than once if selected well
- Show the quality of thinking by your choice and use of evidence by selecting carefully & explaining it clearly
- The quality and annotation of evidence can make a significant difference to your credit; explain why it is in there and what learning it shows
- Seek to protect anyone/ any organisation named in the evidence by keeping it confidential and anonymous unless you get written permission
- Be sensitive to the implications of your evidence; are you exposing internal problems or placing anyone in a bad light?
- Provide a context for the evidence – how does it fit into your work and learning?
- If you are short of evidence you can always write more; use illustrations to show how you have used your learning. It can bring a claim to life by illustrating a point you are trying to communicate;

For example, you may have made a point about managing a project, such as forward planning. You might support this with an illustration/ portrait/cameo of what you mean, such as:- '*I have learnt that when I manage a project there are other departments involved in it who do not work to my timescales, so therefore I have to factor in extra time to take account of that; e.g. I have had particular problems with the finance department who will not process payments on some days because there is only one person available to do it. I now plan to invoice them on specific days to work around their competing deadlines'.*

Making the most of learning in your RAL claim
(Taken from Claimants Resource pack)

Guide to Using the Volume Descriptors

Key word: Volume Descriptors

- Volume descriptors are designed to help you get the most credit from your claim.
- Volume descriptors explain the sorts of things the assessor will look for when awarding credit.

Using several volume descriptors will help to maximise the credit from your RAL claim, although they do not necessarily guarantee extra credits, they should help you to get as many as you can. You must be explicit within each area of learning to optimise the credit awarded. Not all descriptors will be applicable to every area of learning, but try to use more than one for each of the areas of learning for which you claim. A fuller explanation of each descriptor is found below.

Volume descriptors	**Credit volume guide**
•	Incremental learning over time (+/- years), demonstrates broadening or deepening of learning and knowledge with application to practice
•	Explicit outcomes or product(s) that may correspond to: • a validated module or • accredited learning activity or • WBL project outcomes • Previous claims in similar area of learning
•	Presented in sections or components that reflect Learning outcomes (LO) or Specific learning incidents
•	Demonstrates building levels of learning from first principles through increasing complexity e.g. includes reflection and analysis of learning and / or consequent impact upon others is clearly evident or applied in several contexts
•	Recognition of formal training / education hours, or qualification older than 5 years. (10 hours = 1 credit for accredited training). (N.B. Same training days can only be counted once per RAL portfolio)
•	Draws on a variety of sources of knowledge &/ or demonstrates originality /uniqueness / creativity
•	High quality evidence presented & annotated appropriately

When you have drafted your action plan think about which **Volume** and the **Level descriptors** could help you uncover your learning.

When you have drafted your area of learning make your own assessment of it:

- Have you analysed your learning?
- Have you shown how your learning has grown and changed?
- Does your evidence show what you learnt?

- How have you used the level and volume descriptors?

Making the most of learning in your RAL claim.

These notes should be read in conjunction with the table above that indicates the credit volume (amount). Provided you include some of these ideas in your claim as fully as you can, you should be able to make the most of the number of credits from your claim.

1. Incremental learning over time (+/- years), demonstrates broadening or deepening of learning and knowledge with application to practice.

This is an opportunity for you to demonstrate what you have learnt over a period of years. You may find that recent learning, such as in the last two years, is easier to recall. For example, you may have just learnt how to search the internet, and therefore your new knowledge will be much easier for you to recall. More importantly, you may have started a new job within the last two years, and therefore be very aware of what you didn't know when you started in the job as compared to what you know now. Alternatively, you may have started this learning a long time ago, more than five years, and therefore how you learnt it may not be so easy to recall. You may also be very proficient at this area of learning now, and be able to express this in a way that demonstrates you have a lot of expertise and knowledge. This means that your assessor is likely to give you high level credit for this learning, but as an undergraduate you will also need some credits at lower levels, 1 and 2, and therefore it is a good idea to try to recall and record how your learning grew over a period of time. This should show that you started off with a small amount of learning, and that you have built on it to make more knowledge. If you are able to do this, your assessor will see if you can be awarded a range of credits within the claim.

Learning usually grows over time. For example, you may have started in an office and being responsible for the stationery order. To broaden your learning, you may have extended this learning into how to order other types of equipment required in the department, or perhaps taken additional responsibilities related to hiring of equipment. When you are analysing this learning in your claim, you would state the starting point that you began at, and then explain the learning that you developed in order to broaden your skills. Be careful not to describe in too much detail but try to provide a concise summary.

An example of deepening your learning might be how you developed the ordering of equipment in your department into understanding the budgetary and financial implications associated with it. This may have developed your learning yet further into understanding cash flow in the department. Make sure your learning progression is explicit within your claim, as assessors cannot award credits for learning that is hinted at, rather than fully presented. Illustrate with examples to show what you can do now as opposed to where you started.

2. Explicit outcomes or project.

This category is used when you can demonstrate that you have produced an outcome or a product that is similar to a specific module. Your advisor will be able to help you with this, but if you have undertaken a project at work, you should be able to describe what you have learnt from the process of undertaking that project. One way of doing this is to think about how you would do it differently next time if you were to do it again, and the reasons why you learnt that.

You may not think you have done a project at work before, because it hasn’t been called that, but you may have been involved in developing things like: a protocol,

procedure or policy, or an information leaflet, a newsletter for your organization or perhaps a teaching package for new staff. All of these activities will have given you learning opportunities, so by reflecting on these you can identify what you learnt from the process. By stating the outcome of the learning very clearly, such as in the form of a product, it may be possible to equate this learning with an equivalent taught module and therefore gain credits that reflect a formal module outcome. For example, a qualified nurse from the Czech Republic came to work in the UK. She had to learn technical medical language as well as sufficient English to converse with colleagues and patients. She made a claim for learning English and her learning was recognised as being similar to a taught module that international nurses coming to this country had to study. She therefore gained credit that recognised the similarities between the module and her own learning. This can be seen as matching specific modules available to your study.

You may have undertaken training in the workplace, such as Health and Safety or Risk Assessment training. These training programmes may not have formal accreditation already but the University may have awarded credits to similar programmes elsewhere, and therefore be able to award your training experience with similar credits. Remember, it is the learning that we are interested in, not just the experience, so make it clear as to what you took away from that training programme and how you were able to apply it at work.

The amount of credits that you are awarded for a particular claim may be related to the fact that a number of other claimants have submitted similar areas of learning in the past, and therefore there may be some "case law", which will guide the award of credits. For example, previous claimants may have submitted a particular area of learning, and it has always been awarded a specific amount of credits. This may be because it reflects a taught module of a similar nature, or the assessor feels that this reflects the usual amount of credit awarded. You may be tempted to compare the results of your claim with other claimants, but this may not be doing yourself justice, as other claimants will present their case differently and will be awarded credits accordingly. The feedback from your advisor after your draft will give you some good pointers as to how you can make the maximum credit from your claim.

3. Presented in sections or components.

When you make your RAL claim, you should try to break each area of learning into component parts. Sometimes these components may relate to specific learning incidents. These learning incidents can sometimes be expressed as outcomes which indicate particular activities, or, as educators express it: ‘learning outcomes’, which arose from this time of learning. For example, you may be compiling a claim regarding communication within your organisation. This area of learning is likely to consider aspects such as; verbal communication, written communication, electronic communication, dissemination of information, standards and procedures to communicate key issues and such like. It may be that a critical learning opportunity occurred during the time you that you learnt the skills, and was a key influence in what and how you learnt. A critical learning opportunity may have been an incident or a particular issue that demonstrated how well or how poorly communication systems were working, and therefore provided you with a learning insight that helped you to develop your skill in this area.

Critical learning incidents do not need to be a negative experience but can also be positive experience and may result from feedback from your workplace or colleagues. There may be several separate incidents that contributed to your area of learning but it is not a guarantee that the more learning incidents you include, the higher the number

of credits will be, but it will help you to analyse your learning in more depth, and that should contribute to the amount and level of credits you gain.

4. Demonstrates building levels of learning from first principles through increasing complexity.

If you are experienced in a particular area in which you are making a claim, you may be able to articulate your learning in a way that demonstrates you are able to think at a high level of academic ability, as indicated by the level descriptors. This may mean that you are clearly thinking and explaining your learning at graduate or postgraduate level. However, if you are an undergraduate, you will also require credits at level 1 and level 2 which are equivalent to first and second year undergraduate level. You will need to gain credit at these levels as they are not awarded automatically even if you have made a claim that reaches a higher level. This is can be achieved by explaining what knowledge you had at the beginning of this area of learning, and what you have learned over a period of time. You should demonstrate that you have the underpinning knowledge which is reflective of the lower levels of academic ability, and therefore several levels of academic credit may be awarded for the same claim. In order to make the best of this, you will need to be analytical and to explain more fully as to how your initial learning developed. Showing how you are able to use your learning in a variety of contexts is another way of demonstrating higher level learning. Your assessor may be able to see this when they look at a draft of your claim, but you need to think about it as you write to show how your learning has grown.

Very often claims at all levels have not been made explicit within the written text, and although the assessor will be able to see that you could have more knowledge within the claim they would be guessing what you have learnt and therefore it is not possible to award credits. If the learning is implicit credits cannot be awarded. Therefore you need to review the area of learning critically when you have drafted it, and demonstrate that learning has occurred and is progressive so that all possible learning is captured.

You may be able to demonstrate additional reflection and consequent learning from a situation, or be able to analyse your learning particularly well and this may result in your assessor awarding more credits. If you are able to demonstrate the extent of the impact of your learning and how it has involved and affected other people, this too maybe awarded in additional credits. For example, if only your immediate colleagues have been impacted by your learning then you are likely to have few credits. However, if you can demonstrate that your learning has had an impact upon a group or department, then it is more likely that you will gain additional credits because of the extent of the impact of your learning.

5. Recognition of formal training.

Attending training days does not guarantee that you have learned anything. You need to be able to explain what you have done with the learning following the training. Training days can only count if you show what you do with the learning afterwards. This means that any evidence of formal training, such as a certificate, cannot guarantee credits. You need to make it clear what you have learned from that training and how it has impacted your practice. You may want to use the same training days as evidence for several areas of learning, but they cannot be counted more than once, so if you include them in several areas of learning, you must indicate that they are repeats. Remember that it is not "experience" that is being accredited, but your learning. You must show how that learning has affected your work and that will enable recognition of the training time. Awarding credits for training days is not obligatory.

There are occasions when a formal programme of study has been undertaken over 5 years ago. It may carry credits and you may have the transcript to prove that you did the training. Because it was over 5 years ago, you will need to show the assessor that the learning is still in use and that you have maintained its currency, and built on it. A typical example is a Certificate in Education, which can carry different amounts of credit, depending on when and where it was studied. If it is over 5 years old and you have not used it in the last few years, you cannot expect to have the credits from it acknowledged in your claim. If however, you didn't use it for a while, but have returned recently to teaching, and have evidence that you have updated yourself and refreshed your skills, the original credits may still be awarded. It is **your** responsibility to gain a transcript of credits from the awarding institution, and you need to be aware that you may not be able to use all the credits in the transcript, depending on university regulations as to how much credit you can use at every academic level.

6. Variety of sources of knowledge used and/ or demonstrates originality/ uniqueness /creativity.

If you are able to demonstrate the use of a variety of sources of knowledge in your claim such as reading, work shadowing, searching the Internet, gaining additional training, or the use of a variety of published information, this will demonstrate that you have drawn on a wide variety of learning resources which will encourage the assessor to consider awarding more credit.

There are occasions when you may be able to present an unusual area of learning, or be particularly creative in how you make a claim for your learning. This is encouraged, and may be recognized as part of the credits. Don't forget that you may have learning from activities outside paid work that you may be able to claim for, such as a position as a club secretary, or as a school governor, or perhaps you've travelled or worked abroad and learned things about different cultures. You may also have learning from a project that you have just started at work, and which may be one of your work based projects later on in your programme. These activities can contribute significant learning and additional credits to your claim if you are able to demonstrate transferable skills from one context to another. If you're unsure how one of these activities might contribute, contact your advisor to discuss it.

7. High quality evidence presented and annotated appropriately.

You may present your evidence very well and so gain more credits. For example, if you annotate it very clearly and link it into the discussion in the areas of learning so that it is easy to see how the evidence illustrates your learning the assessor will be inclined to award more credit. Similarly, if you use a variety of evidence that illustrates your learning particularly well, then this too may contribute to more credit. However, careful selection of evidence should show that you can discriminate between one piece of evidence that illustrates a number of aspects of your learning, as compared to a lot of evidence that says very little.

Good organization and planning of evidence demonstrates an ability to think through your learning and shows that you have considered how you want to present it to others and maximise its potential. The inclusion of testimonials should be to confirm other evidence and should not be considered as adequate evidence in themselves. You **must** also ensure that evidence protects the confidentiality of your workplace, colleagues and anyone else involved. If you specifically want to use something as evidence that involves others, such as photos, a written agreement from the person involved will suffice as consent. Failure to protect others in your evidence may mean that credits cannot be awarded.

Planned programme made explicit.

If you know that you require a specific number of credits from a claim you must make sure you have discussed this with your advisor before you submit a claim. However, your advisor may not remember this much detail about your claim, and it is essential that **you** take responsibility for ensuring that you have made your needs clear. If you are submitting an additional claim it is important you should include a list of areas of learning already achieved so that the assessor can understand where this new claim fits in. This means that they can become aware of the amounts of credits that you will need to complete your programme and they will consider this as they assess your claim. If you need a lot of credits, then you need to show that your additional claim fulfils all the criteria for both level and volume of credit by following some of these guidelines, so that you can maximize your learning from it. The assessor will try to ensure that the credits that you are awarded reflects the learning that is presented within your claim, but it is your responsibility to make is as clear as you can.

These guidelines are only to give you some help with preparing your claim. They do not guarantee particular amounts of credits but will depend on how you demonstrate the learning within it, and the evidence that you use to support it.

Appendix 9 Facilitators Guidance for RAL

Facilitators guide to the Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (RAL) portfolio

Compiled by the Centre for Excellence
In
Work Based Learning

Institute of Work Based Learning @ Middlesex University

Contents……..

Appendices ……..

Facilitators guide to the Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (RAL) portfolio

Introduction
This handbook has been compiled with the help of experienced RAL facilitators and aims to help academic advisers support students through the Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (RAL) module at either undergraduate or postgraduate levels. It will consider each section of the students resource pack and offer guidance drawing from a wide range of knowledge generated from practice.

These sections run parallel to those in the student handbooks and this guidance should be read in conjunction with the students resource pack.

Section 1
Introduction

This section is the introductory section for the student and you may need to elaborate upon some aspects, such as the term 'experiential learning', individually to them. The key elements of the section are related to the student preparing him or her self to undertake the module. It is important that the student understands that it is their knowledge gained from both formal and informal learning that can be used, and that it is not about 'doing' but about their 'learning' from doing. Determining the difference between the two will be explored in more depth later in section 8.

WBL students may not have studied in higher education before, even though they may be quite mature and are usually fairly anxious about what will be required of them, as often they will have entered the programme with non-traditional entry qualifications. It is important that they understand that this module contains several parts for assessment: the action plan, the portfolio and the reflective essay, all of which are designed to enable them to draw on their experience.

- The action plan is designed to help them organise their time and plan in some depth, and start to engage with the module material, and will be required as part of their final submission (for undergraduates).
- The portfolio is the component in which they put together their learning from experience for award of academic credit.
- The reflective essay will be assessed on the 20 point scale, and together with the action plan form 15 credits of learning for undergraduates (WBS 2803).
- Postgraduate students do not submit a formative action plan as their module is worth 10 credits (WBS 4802) and relates only to the reflective essay that accompanies their claim.

Communication systems

One of the most important elements for advisers at this point of the module is to ensure your personal preferences in terms of how and when students contact you have been made clear to the student. It is expected practice that contacts from students will be acknowledged by an email or phone call within 24 hours of receipt to confirm that a message has been received. Usually this will be followed up within a working week with a more specific response, such as formal feedback from a draft assignment. If it is likely to take longer than a week, warn the student that there may be a delay so that they know that they have not been forgotten. The guidance from the subject handbook is that they will get a response within 10 working days, but as the semester is quite short this takes a large chunk out of their study time without feedback. We would like to encourage you to give prompt feedback as it is known to be a good learning motivator and enables the student to keep on target.

Other communication channels may be through Oasisplus. You may find it useful to designate a specific time each week to be your 'teaching time' on Oasis, so that you can arrange to meet students at the discussion board at a particular time or day, or so that they know that if they post something, say over a weekend, they can expect a response by the end of the week for them to work on over the next few days. As the majority of WBL students work, or may be located across different time zones, if you are arranging a 'live text' chat on Oasisplus special consideration to appropriate timing may need to be considered.

The undergraduate module has been designed to have formative assessment at week 6 on Oasisplus, and students are encouraged to send in drafts of their work for feedback before the final submission date. This should be accounted for within their action plan which they will submit at week 6 for comments and feedback from peers and their adviser.

Learning Log

The use of a learning log/diary runs through all WBL modules as a way of developing critical reflexivity. The diary is personal to the student, but its use should be encouraged so that they gain confidence in writing about their learning and have some data to draw upon when they come to write the reflective components of WBL assignments. All WBL modules have a reflective element that links between each stage of the programme, and which takes a slightly different form in each module, and is supported by the Reflective Learning Handbook. If students are accessing just this module and not the whole WBL programme students will not have the reflective handbook.

Reflective cycles and other reflective resources are being developed for easy access on Oasisplus. However, if you are used to using some specific reflective tools and approaches please continue to do so, sharing them with students and colleagues, so that we can add to our range of resources.

Section 2
Format, content and assessment of portfolio

This section explains what should be submitted and the correct order and format. It is useful to go through this with the student to ensure that they understand what is appropriate to be included. Each of these sections will be explained in more detail, but it is important the format for the front sheet of the portfolio is adhered to so that student information is easily retrieved and the list of the areas of learning submitted can be seen at a glance. If the student is submitting a second claim, they still need to have a front sheet to it, with clear listing of areas of learning that they submitted the first time and what has been submitted the second time.

A recent addition to the information included here, is the fuller explanation of the level descriptors. These are stated in the subject handbook, but our research has shown that students do not always understand what the academic language means, particularly at this early stage of the programme and therefore a fuller explanation has been considered necessary. These level descriptors are made into specific statements at each academic level and you may like to acquaint yourself with them at an early stage from the Subject handbook, section 11, as they are used in all WBL assessment.

The action plan for the undergraduates also asks the student to identify at least two level descriptors and two volume descriptors (see section 8) and to consider how they will aim to address these within their RAL claim. This should alert advisers to any difficulties students may be having with the use and understanding of academic language.

Section 3
Academic credit

Students are usually not initially aware of the way the academic credit systems work and will look to their adviser for guidance as to how to construct their academic award. The university allows two thirds of any programme to be completed by accreditation of prior learning which may be of two types:

- Learning on courses of study which has already been credit-rated. In this case, the student is not asking the University to *give* them credit for this learning, but to *recognise* it. (See Section 6).
- Experiential learning, for example, learning gained from work or other significant experiences. This learning must be described in detail in the areas of learning, (see Sections 7-9).

The implications for student programmes means that even if the student is going to do an ordinary degree (300 credits, 240 at levels 1 & 2, and 60 credits at Level 3), they must do 100 credits with MU, of which 60 credits must be at level 3, and if they are going to do an honours degree (360 credits) they will need to do 120 credits at level 3 with MU. Essentially this means that there is very little advantage for a student to decide to only pursue an ordinary degree if they come in with a lot of prior accreditation. However, if they find the work difficult and have taken a long time to obtain an ordinary degree it may be a good stepping off point. This can be explored further during the programme planning module in the next semester.

Postgraduate students can also bring in substantial pre-accreditation, but the core modules will limit the amount of prior accreditation they can use. They can make a claim for up to 70 credits of prior learning. If they have taken research methods at a suitable level before and can make a claim for it as prior learning, then they can bring in up to 100 credits, of which 30 may be at graduate level, and 70 at masters level.

Claiming prior certificated learning

It is the students' responsibility to gain transcripts of credits from previous courses, either from the educational provider or from NARIC (National Recognition and Information Centre for the UK) which is the National Agency for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), and who are the official information provider on the comparability of international qualifications from over 180 countries worldwide. They can only be accessed through a password for specific enquiries and may be used to confirm level and equivalence of overseas qualifications. The evidence of equivalence should be included as part of the claimants RAL claim so that the credits can be recognised at the outset of the programme. Other WBL colleagues may have assessed portfolios with similar overseas qualifications before, so it can be helpful to ask colleagues about them.

Section 4
Recognising past achievements – the CV

The first thing the claimant is asked to do is to draft and annotate an up to date CV. The CV will give a number of clues as to areas of learning that the claimant may be able to develop. The claimant should reflect upon his/her career and where possible try to take an overview of their career development to identify where they are now and where they want the programme to take them. This will help them identify learning from their career trajectory and enable them to focus on a specific pathway for their programme. It may be helpful to think of it as a learning autobiography.

Annotating the CV shows what the claimant has learnt during each role. It can be helpful to suggest they identify how each role helped them prepare for the next job, or if a role made them change their career direction.

Ways to use the CV include:

- Identification of the learning that has come from each job role as it may identify themes that have grown over a period of time
- The skills/ knowledge acquired in each job role that prepared the move onto the next job, e.g. for promotion within a particular organisation.
- Identification of patterns of job activities/ roles; what does the pattern tell you about the persons skills and abilities? Can you see where their strengths and abilities are?
- What sort of transitions are there between jobs? Are there promotions or sideways steps or career changes? Are these reflected in the skills and learning that the person has identified?
- Is there specific professional updating recorded? What sort of qualifications are recorded? Do they need to be updated regularly e.g. like professional legislation, or are these qualifications used everyday and therefore kept up to date through regular use?
- What sort of time scales are represented in the CV? Is this learning that has grown over some time, or is it recent? Does it reflect a career change or new venture?
- Is there some significant voluntary or unpaid work that has influenced other activities in the person's career? e.g. travel or working abroad, school governor, working for a charity, working in a family business, caring for a dependant relative?

Any or all of these activities may contribute to an individuals learning and there may be clear themes such as administration, project managing, counselling or communications etc, that stand out, and which can then be translated into a substantial area of learning. There may be some meshing of personal and professional life which is to be expected as people tend to follow activities that suit their personality, knowledge and skills and this may involve activities both at work and in their social life, and not be clearly delineated between the two. However, such an area might be a good AOL as there would be evidence of using the learning in several contexts.

Alternatively, new interests or new projects can be included as new learning is more recent and more easily recalled and so may form the basis of a WBL project later on, but also be recognised as part of the learning trajectory. Appendix 1 shows some examples of CV's which demonstrates how the CV can identify learning themes.

Section 5
Current activities; Job Description

The job description is a useful way to identify more recent learning that may have been acquired. This will also indicate the level and range of responsibilities that a student may have. It is also useful in terms of helping a student identify what anyone doing their job needs to know, so that if they were scoping their learning from a particular job role, they can try to summarise what someone would need to know if they needed to do their job at short notice. If there is a significant voluntary activity or second job role identified in the CV, e.g. treasurer of a sports club, member of a uniformed organisation, it might be appropriate to write a second job description for that role.

If the student is self employed they may not have a job description so this is an ideal opportunity for them to create one and identify the various components of what they do. A good way to do this is to advise them to keep a diary for at least a week of all the activities they do and then try to formalise it into different parts of their job role. This can be a very powerful opportunity for them to identify:

- what they like doing,
- what they do well,
- what they would like to do more of,
- what they would like to stop doing.

It is also useful for someone who is trying to determine their career direction and enable them to analyse their strengths, weaknesses and preferences. Whilst this may not seem like part of the programme, it can help to motivate the student to focus their programme in a direction that supports their personal and professional development in the direction that they have chosen to go, and can be a strong force for change or action.

Headings in the job role may also flag up areas of learning.
Things like:

- organisation of…,
- management of…,
- leader for….

Responsibilities will also indicate how important a person's role is and therefore their sphere of influence which may be particularly important if they are trying to determine whether they should be doing an undergraduate or postgraduate programme.

Broadly speaking, if they are taking full responsibility for several thousands of pounds worth of equipment, then their level of influence and responsibility within an organisation is likely to be significant, and therefore quite possibly at Masters level, whereas someone who is not responsible for any or many others, and there are limited or few repercussions if something goes wrong, and is working at a much lower level, is more likely to be an undergraduate.

Questions to ask which may help to extract areas of learning are:

- What are you doing now that you weren't 5 years ago?
- What new things have you learnt in the last 2 years?
- What would someone else (e.g. your partner) need to do your job?
- What did you have to find out to answer a particular query?
- What's moved you on in your understanding about your role?
- What do you know more about than you did before?
- What voluntary work are you involved in?
- Why do people come to you for advice? What sort of questions do they ask?
- What sort of people come to you? Internal or external persons seeking advice?

These questions also help to determine the level that someone is working at. For

example, people seeking a claimants advice for a national body indicates their specialist type of work, but if it's other people in the same office who seek advice then it indicates influence within the organisation. By identifying the extent of that influence the level of skill and expertise of the claimant will begin to emerge.

In relation to their responsibilities

- How many people are you responsible for?
- How much money is involved?
- What can happen if it goes wrong?
- In what ways could it go wrong? – what would be the impact if went wrong?
- How important is your job within the organisation?
- What are your responsibilities in regards to Health and Safety or Risk Assessment?

The answers to these questions should provide some titles for AOLs and quite possibly the component parts as well (see section 8).

Section 6
Using credit rated learning in the portfolio

The student may identify previous courses that have been taken and may be eligible to be used towards HE credit. Accredited courses taken outside the university can be counted if they are within five years of being completed. If they are over five years old then they can be used as evidence towards experiential learning provided the student uses them appropriately in their claims as evidence or indications where learning began.

Be alert to courses taken in FE that carry just a few credits. These may have been taken in an FE college, rather than at HE levels, and you should ask for a transcript from the FE college to confirm the level and amount of credits. For example, trade union courses often have 1 or 2 credits at level 2 or 3, and often refer to the amount of time spent on a course, rather than any assessment that might be included. If in doubt, ask about the type and amount of assessment, and if necessary see evidence of it. A common example might be a City & Guilds qualification at FE level 3 (HE level 0), which is an entry to HE programmes, and may be used as part of an award such as a foundation degree, also taken at an FE college. Another example that can be confusing in terms of credits is a Certificate in education. These can start as a City and Guilds Award at FE level 3 (HE Level 0), but go onto a post compulsory teaching certificate at either HE level 1 or 2. Certificates and transcripts should be checked carefully as there are a number of credit variations in circulation.

Section 7
Areas of learning 1 - making a list of titles

There is comprehensive guidance in the student handbook in relation to finding titles of AOLs (areas of learning). However, you may need to assist the claimant to make sense of his/her findings and help to disentangle areas of learning that may overlap or be duplicated. It may be helpful to think of some generic trans-disciplinary skills that could connect between different AOLs, e.g.

- Negotiation skills
- Dealing with people/ customers/ colleagues
- Dealing with conflict
- Commonalities between aols, e.g. recruitment, people
- Finance and budget holding
- Managing change

There are no hard and fast rules regarding the number of AOLs needed. Some claimants will come up with lots of little ones, others with two or three big ones. In order to aim for maximum credit claimants are often advised that 6 -10 areas of learning is about right for UG work, and 3 - 4 areas for PG work. When identifying titles it may be that several big areas can be compiled by combining several smaller themes together, so that the subjects complement each other. Too many little ones can make a claim become fragmented or a single big one unwieldy.

AOLs and their likely contents can reflect university modules and it may help to look at the subject catalogue for module titles and learning outcomes. However, it is rare to ask a claimant to match specific modules within a WBL programme, but this may be done if you need to advise a claimant on the kind of things that might be found within an AOL with a particular subject focus. Titles may also emerge from considering in-service training programmes or CPD study days.

AOL Titles should aim to be no longer than 30 characters, including spaces, and a strong title will help to focus a claim. Transitive titles such as ‘managing a project’ indicate that these knowledges and skills are directly related to the individual and offer scope for several sub sections which can be quite big overall. Titles such as ‘communications’ would fit into the transferable skills that UG claims must include, but to use a theme like communications at PG level would require a unique and complex approach to communication strategies. Example AOLs can be found on Oasisplus and in appendix 2.

Section 8
Areas of learning 2 – working up your areas of learning

The guidance here complements that in the RAL handbooks, but considers the ways these activities may be used in a teaching situation. There are a number of ways areas of learning can be developed and some examples are described below.

a) **Make a mind map/ spidergram** of each title and identify key learning associated with each title as an off shoot.

This exercise can be done with a group if there are some similar areas of learning such as 'teaching' or 'project managing' that the group can contribute to. By identifying the component elements of the area of learning, these can lend themselves to becoming learning outcomes if phrased accordingly. They can also be used to reflect different level descriptors so that if the student is aiming for a specific academic level, you can assist them to express it accordingly.

b) Identify specific achievements – specific examples of something that has been accomplished such as; project work, a document written or produced, an artefact that has been created, or some publicity or information material. These can be used as evidence to support the claim. By starting with the finished product the learning can be traced through it's development.

Specific questions can be asked to help uncover the learning such as:

- Why did I do this and how did I know how to do it?
- If I did this again how would I do it differently? Why?
- Why did I do this in a particular way? What would the consequences be if I did it differently?
- What went well, what went wrong and why?
- Have I done this like this before? Would I do it the same way again? Why?

c) Identify a newly acquired skill or work activity – this may emerge from reviewing the job description and identifying something that has been learnt recently from job changes or developments.

d) Review training documentation - or other evidence such as minutes of meetings to help trace the development of learning or, if routine work is different to other peoples and has grown in a specific direction the claimant may be sought after as an expert on some issues.

To help find learning components ask the following questions:

- What would someone else need to know to do my job? If I handed it over to someone tomorrow what would they need to know?
- What is the context of my work? How does this influence what I do?
- Are there policies/ legislation/ procedures that I must be acquainted with to practice/ work safely?
- Do I have to address specific types of problems? How do I go about this? How did I learn how to tackle them?
- What specific responsibilities or professional updating must I ensure are considered?
- In what ways have I changed?
- Did I have particular learning experiences that have altered the way in which I would tackle something in the future?

These questions should help the student to think about the component parts of learning that are relevant for their claim.

e) Constructing an area of learning
Writing areas of learning can be very time consuming and the claimant needs to plan reflection time and drafting time, ideally using learning points as a framework on which to construct it.

It has been reported that sending drafts to advisers is the most useful source of support for claimants in the process of preparing a claim. It is important that the claimant sets the scene and context and links the learning to the CV or JD where appropriate. Specific guidance is in the resource pack.

When reading drafts as a facilitator ask yourself if you can see the 'learning' emerge from the 'doing'?
Has the claimant stated what happened and why they made decisions?

It can be difficult to get people unused to reflecting upon their work and actions to explain their underpinning rationale and processes behind their decisions. They need to demonstrate the knowledge that underpins their decisions, but also need to avoid too much description, yet demonstrate analysis.

The learning can be illustrated with either evidence written and interwoven as part of the text, demonstrating application of learning, or can be linked to the evidence that is listed and collected at the end of the portfolio. A useful reflective framework to use is the 'WHAT' cycle (Boud et al 1985) (see Appendix 3), which is a useful way to get a description – that is the context and activity, followed by the rationale i.e. the underpinning knowledge, and then the outcome or implications of it – the 'so whatness'.

Other facets of learning can be found by reflecting on the level descriptors in Section 11 in the Subject Handbook.

f) Making the most of learning in a RAL claim

The guidance for claimants can be found in the resource book. The information below is written with the facilitator/ assessor in mind, although essentially the information is similar.

The number of volume descriptors represented within a claim can be an approximate guide as to the volume of credit that can be awarded. The use of several descriptors does not necessarily guarantee extra credits. The claimant must be explicit and effectively elaborate within the claim to optimise the credit award. Where descriptors have been fully exploited and incorporated into the analysis of learning then more credits may be awarded.

Volume descriptors; Credit volume guide
• Incremental learning over time (+/- years), demonstrates broadening or deepening of learning and knowledge with application to practice

• Explicit outcomes or product(s) that may correspond to:
  o a validated module or
  o accredited learning activity or
  o WBL project outcomes
  o previous claims in similar areas of learning

• Presented in sections or components that reflect Learning outcomes (LO) or specific learning incidents
• Demonstrates building levels of learning from first principles through increasing complexity i.e. includes reflection and analysis of learning and / or consequent impact upon others is clearly evident/ applied in several contexts
• Recognition of formal training / education hours, or qualification older than 5 years. (10 hours = 1 credit for accredited training). (N.B. Same training days can only be counted once per RAL portfolio)
• Draws on a variety of sources of knowledge &/ or demonstrates originality /uniqueness / creativity
• High quality evidence presented & annotated appropriately

Currently there is no exact match between numbers of credits and number of volume descriptors used, but these are guidelines to assist compilation of a claim.

f.1. Incremental learning over time (+/- years), demonstrates broadening or deepening of learning and knowledge with application to practice.

This category should be considered when the claimant demonstrates that their learning has clearly been built over a period of years. There should be evidence of the knowledge that they started with in that particular area of learning, and the way they have increased their learning over the intervening period, which may be recently or over a length of time, up to or over five years. More recent knowledge may be easier to remember and the learning trajectory clearer, but knowledge that started over five years ago should not be discounted, provided the claimant can demonstrate the growth of learning, and how it has been built upon since then.

f. 2. Explicit outcomes or product.

This category is used when the claim is similar to the outcome of a validated module or some kind of accredited learning activity that may be used by an organisation, or the claimant may demonstrate a completed outcome or a product that is similar to a specific work based learning project product. As an assessor you may be familiar with the requirements of work based projects and the similarities between the credit rating of a work based project, and how it may equate to a RAL claim. The examples of products may be things like the development of: a protocol, a teaching package, an information leaflet, an organizational news letter, or perhaps a publicity campaign. Accredited activity from work may be related to specific training in the workplace such as health and safety or risk assessment training.

Where there are a number of claimants who have submitted similar areas of learning, then there may be some "case law" which will guide the award of credits. For example, classroom assistants may submit areas of learning that have been awarded similar credits, because that is what they have been considered as being worth within a professional programme. Additionally, students on a similar programme may well compare the results between each other, and this needs to be taken into account and the feedback very specific as to why and what credits they have been awarded. If additional credits above and beyond the usual amount for a common area of learning are awarded, then the feedback to the claimant should be very explicit as to why those

extra credits have been awarded – or not, and the use of these volume descriptors may be of help. Similarly, accredited training within an organization may be very similar to an area of learning that is submitted for a claim. The experienced assessor may be aware of previous credit award for this accredited activity, and will endeavour to ensure parity with previous similar activity.

f. 3. Presented in sections or components.

When making RAL claims, claimants can be encouraged to break down each area of learning into component parts that may reflect specific learning incidents. These learning incidents may not be expressed in language like academic learning outcomes, but may indicate particular activities or critical learning opportunities that arose during the time they were learning. For example, a claimant may be compiling a claim concerning communication within an organization. This area of learning may include specific learning incidents such as; verbal communication, written communication, electronic communication, dissemination of information, standards and procedures to communicate key issues and such like.

A critical learning opportunity may be an incident that highlighted to the claimant the deficits within the communication systems or, a particular issue that demonstrated how well she had learned to communicate. Critical learning incidents do not need to be a negative experience but can be positive experiences and may result from feedback from the workplace or colleagues. The implication here is that the more components present, the more likely there is to be additional credits within the claim.

f. 4 Demonstrates building levels of learning from first principles through increasing complexity

Experienced claimants may be able to articulate their current learning in a way that demonstrates they are functioning at a high level of academic ability, as measured by the level descriptors. This may mean that they are able to express their learning at level 3 or level 4. However, if these are undergraduate claimants, they will also require credits at level 1 and level 2. This is best achieved by encouraging them to articulate their starting point when they began to learn this area. This means they can demonstrate underpinning initial knowledge, which should be reflective of the lower levels of academic ability, and therefore several levels of academic credit can be awarded for the same amount of claim. This may just require the claimant to be more analytical or explain the journey of their learning more fully to demonstrate they have the full range of underpinning knowledge. Increasing credits like this should be picked up during a review of a draft claim and should be brought to the claimants' notice in the early stages of preparing their RAL claim.

Often claims at all levels are not made explicit, and the assessor can see that there is potentially knowledge at all levels but cannot award credits, because the learning has not been articulated, i.e. implicit learning does not gain credit. Therefore, claimants must be encouraged to review the areas of learning critically at the draft stage to demonstrate learning development through various academic levels to ensure they gain maximum credit.

Where a claimant has demonstrated additional reflection and learning from a situation, or has analyzed their learning particularly well, more credits may be awarded. Where the impact of their learning affects others this too may be recognized in the award of credits. For example, if a claimants learning has had an impact upon a group or upon a department, rather than just their immediate colleagues, then it is far more likely that their learning will gain additional credits.

f. 5. Recognition of formal training.

Inclusion of evidence that a claimant has attended formal training does not demonstrate that they have achieved any learning, only that they were present at the time. Therefore, evidence of formal training should be considered lightly and not as a guarantee that learning has occurred. Occasionally the same training days may be included as evidence for several areas of learning, and therefore it is particularly important that it is not recognized repeatedly and credit awarded automatically. If the claimant is able to articulate **how** they have taken the learning from the training days, used it in practice, and extended their knowledge and skills, then this claim for training time may be recognized, but only once within a total claim. The usual accepted formula is 10 hours of training equals one credit point, but this does **NOT** mean that the claimant is automatically awarded credits associated with training hours, it is just a guide.

To recognise courses that have been undertaken over 5 years ago they must be presented as being in current use. The claimant should have discussed the course with their advisor at the beginning of the RAL process, and MUST include a transcript of credits from the awarding institution as part of their evidence to be awarded any credits.

It is the **claimants'** responsibility to contact the awarding institution to gain a transcript, not the responsibility of their advisor. They must also demonstrate that they have maintained that learning as being live and current, and show that they have updated their knowledge and practice. For example; a certificate in education may be awarded with a variety of credits varying from 120 @ level 1, to 90 credits @level 1 and 30 @ level 2, or 60 @ level 3 etc. If a student has gained a Cert Ed, but has not taught since it was awarded over 5 years ago, then these credits cannot be seen as viable. If, however, they undertook the course, took time out during the intervening years and have since returned to teaching and can demonstrate that they have updated their knowledge and practice on return to teaching, then these credits are viable.

However, these are not foregone conclusions and claims should include a persuasive case for awarding the credits, together with evidence of current use and learning. If the course was so long ago that the initial credits cannot be counted, the area of learning that is based upon the original course should demonstrate that the learning is current and therefore the course acts as evidence.

f. 6. Variety of sources of knowledge used and/or demonstrates originality/ uniqueness/ creativity.

The claimant may cite a variety of sources of knowledge. For example, this may include reading, work shadowing, searching the Internet, gaining additional training, and the use of a variety of texts to inform themselves. Where they have indicated a variety of sources of knowledge these should be acknowledged in the credit award.

There are occasions when claimants present very unusual areas of learning, or are particularly creative in how they make claims for their learning. This should be encouraged, and recognized as part of the award, and therefore additional credit may be a suitable way of acknowledging this.

f. 7. High quality evidence presented and annotated appropriately.

When the quality of evidence is outstanding, perhaps prepared extremely well, maybe annotated very specifically, or demonstrates a variety of sources, this too will contribute to the award of credits, because it demonstrates a higher level of academic planning, organization and consideration than other claimants functioning at the same

academic level. The inclusion of testimonials should be to confirm evidence rather than provide the whole evidence of learning.

f. 8. What does a good accreditation claim look like?

The list below has been compiled from research into the assessment of RAL and claims that are good have the following qualities;

- The context in which learning occurs is explicit, and factors affecting the situation are captured without being too descriptive.
- The task or role that was being undertaken is clearly explained and situated within the context and work activity
- When problem solving is used there is a clear rationale for the choices and decisions made
- Self-awareness is shown, together with an understanding of the implications of one's own and other people's behaviour and actions
- Where appropriate, reference to academic theories or knowledge is included to support decisions and actions, and is referenced accurately using academic conventions. The use of theory is not obligatory in a claim, but if it is known then it should be included.
- Learning is shown to be progressive, is built upon and the outcomes explicit
- There is evidence of reflection and analysis within the area of learning
- It is well written, concise, organised and tightly worded
- Evidence is carefully selected, referred to and linked with the narrative, and demonstrates how the learning was used. Where there is limited available evidence, illustrations, such as case studies within the text, show how learning was applied and developed.
- Each piece of evidence may be used in several ways to demonstrate different aspects of learning, thus reducing the amount of evidence but showing discrimination towards those pieces that support several aspects of learning.
- A distillation of knowledge from professional experience which demonstrates understanding of practice issues, and application of theory to practice.

The case for a second claim.

This has not been identified as a specific criteria, but if a claimant requires a specific number of credits this should have been discussed with their adviser prior to submission of the claim. However, advisers cannot remember every detail about each claimant, and it is helpful, particularly if the claimant is submitting an additional claim, if a list of the areas of learning already achieved is included, as well as an indication of what credit deficit is outstanding. Sometimes assessors are aware that the claimant is aiming for a particular number of credit points, and assess the portfolio with that in mind. This may become a barrier to claimants being awarded all the credits that the claim is worth, particularly at postgraduate level. The portfolio should be awarded the credits that it is worth, even if this generates credits the claimant cannot use in their programme. For second claims it is useful to have some indication of what is required, and what areas of learning have been previously submitted.

Section 9
Using evidence

There is comprehensive guidance for using evidence in the claimant's resource pack. It is sometimes helpful to discuss with the claimant what sort of evidence they are going to use and to check that they have considered whether they need permission to use it from their manager or client. The **quality** of the evidence can increase the amount of credits awarded. The quantity of evidence does not guarantee lots of credit, so the claimant needs to be discriminating in their choices.

The purpose of evidence is to illustrate and confirm learning, so it can be interwoven in the AOL claim and used as 'case study' illustrations or examples to show how it has been applied to their learning. Evidence can be an actual product or artefact produced by the claimant and their claim may arise from reflection upon the production process. The way that it is used can bring a claim to life as it can illustrate how knowledge has been used effectively, thereby closing the loop between the learning and doing and illustrate the outcome. A wide range of evidence can be used and some claimants may be very imaginative in their choices, but others need guidance. Claimants also need to remember that evidence does not speak for itself, and that their written text should link to the evidence clearly, explaining what it illustrates and why they have included it. The context for their learning and how the evidence supports that should be seen too. Sometimes a testimonial may be included from a client or colleague, but these should not say more than the claim itself; they should illustrate rather than supplement the claim.

It is helpful for each piece of evidence to have a comment on it to explain its purpose. Some evidence may support learning in several AOLs and this should be made clear. When evidence is chosen it should clearly demonstrate the learning that it is meant to support. A chain of evidence such as e-mail correspondence might be used, for example, as a way of demonstrating the initiation of a project, the inclusion and influence upon others, communication skills and problem solving. However, it is important that the participants' identities are either protected or their permission has been obtained.

Some situations mean that claimants e.g. refugees, do not have evidence and therefore they may be particularly reliant on describing what they have done and using written illustrations, or simulations of a real event to demonstrate their learning. However, this still needs some kind of authentication, perhaps from an employer or similar person in authority in the form of a testimonial to confirm that the claimant is who they say they are and that the evidence they are producing is as near as they can get to the real thing. If they cannot produce evidence, writing more can be a way of demonstrating the extent of their learning.

It is very important to consider ethical issues, protection of others and confidentiality in evidence. Evidence that does not do this may in fact, expose the claimant and lose them credits, so it is essential that they are aware of their responsibilities. Ways to protect evidence includes:

- A letter from a manager or employer at the beginning of evidence stating that permission has been given may be sufficient.
- Any photographs of people should have a disclaimer stating that those in the photos have given their permission.
- Names that are on documents should be obliterated with black felt pen and photocopied so that the original name cannot be identified. For a testimonial or formal document from a place of work, names and headed paper are necessary to confirm authenticity. Lack of self-awareness of the implications of using evidence without protecting the source could lead to loss of credits.

Section 10
The reflective essay

The guidance for the reflective essay is clearly laid out in the resource book. Claimants may wish to use a formal reflective framework to assist them in writing it, but that is not essential. It may be written in the first person as it is their own experience of preparing a claim for experiential learning. Claimants who are from factual or scientific backgrounds may find the process of reflection particularly difficult and may need assistance and early feedback to enable them to develop reflective skills. Reading the resource handbook will help as will some of the suggested reading list. The 'What' cycle as mentioned previously (Appendix 3) is also a useful framework to facilitate deeper reflection.

Some examples of undergraduate reflective essays are included in the appendices (Appendix 4). These are not exceptional pieces of work, but offer some examples of reflective essays.

Section 11
Assessing the module

The guidance given in the resource pack explains the process for the claimants. For the adviser, the role now becomes that of the assessor.

Tips to assist assessment of claims include:

- Reading the CV and JD to get an idea of the context of the claim
- Reading through the portfolio quickly to get an overview of the claim, then reading it in more depth to assess the amount and level of learning.
- Keeping the level descriptors close at hand and identifying which ones are clearly evident in the claim, using notes or post-its applied to specific places in the claim to aid assessment decisions and claimant feedback.
- Making notes whilst reading each claim so that you can keep track of why you made a decision about level or amount of credit for student feedback and to justify your assessment decision.
- Assessment will take a lot of time initially, but speed up with practice. Allow yourself as much time as possible to assess claims.
- Check on the evidence as it's cited in the claims to see if it corroborates the claim.
- If at first glance the claim is not very substantial, try to assess it and the reflective essay early before the final deadline for assignments as these tend to be required before portfolio assessment. If no credits are to be awarded then the reflective essay can achieve a pass grade even if the claimant has not made a successful claim.
- If unsure, consult a colleague and swap claims to see if you are making similar judgements. It can be very easy to 'lose the plot' when assessing and it's good practice to discuss it with a colleague
- Award the claim the credit amount and level it is worth, not what you think the claimant needs. This may result in them getting too much or too little credit, which is not important at this stage. They should be awarded what the claim deserves as the rest of the programme will address deficits or surplus of credit.
- Don't be afraid to award no credit if you think it is not credit worthy
- Seek advice from a subject expert if necessary. Ask colleagues to recommend someone to you in another school if you are not sure of appropriate people to contact.
- If you are unsure about levels, check against some project work at the appropriate level
- If you find the language differs considerably within the claim, it may be that English is not the claimants' first language, or they may have copied bits from other sources, e.g. the internet. If there is content that you are not sure about, select a sentence and put it into Google to see if there's a match on-line. Plagiarism is fairly uncommon in RAL claims, but fraudulent claims can be quite easy to spot by changes in language or levels of sophisticated argument that is inconsistent.
- When writing feedback give the claimant an idea of what worked well and not so well so that if they need to do another claim they have some guidelines to help them
- When trying to assess RAL claims it can be helpful to see it holistically, whatever the number of AOLs are included. You may have a mental image of the amount of credit you would award for specific amounts of 'outputs'.
- Different academic levels can be awarded to the same individual RAL claims, but you need to look for evidence of building the AOL from initial knowledge to deeper or more specific knowledge to reflect more complexity. The learning needs to be explicit within a claim; credits cannot be awarded for implicit learning.

- Although grades are not awarded to AOL's there are a wide range of claims from excellent through to poor. This may be reflected in the amount of credit that is awarded so that excellent claims receive more credits than weaker claims.
- Ensure the feedback reflects the quality of the claim so that it can be used as guidance should further RAL claims be undertaken.

Section 12
What comes next

The claimant will receive information about their claim on MISIS. Following the Accreditation Board the credit awarded will be put onto the student's record and a letter sent to them to say what they have been awarded. They may contact you direct if they have not received as much credit as they hoped for. The credit they have been awarded will contribute to the next stage of the programme and will be revisited in Programme planning as this is the point where the claimant has to design their own programme and make up any credit deficits.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Example of themes in a CV
CV Examples

Identifying themes in a CV

The following is an example of identifying learning from work. The example of 'Jane', follows a typical pattern, whereby she has grown into a job and made it a career. It is a useful process to write down what each job role involved, and then reflecting on the learning. It should be possible to identify any areas of learning that she may be able to make some claims in. This has been used in a modified format as a teaching example.

Role	***Skill***
Jane: -	
• Left school at 17 with a few GCSE's, Worked at the Supermarket checkouts full time (was a Saturday job)	**People person** Practical Till training Customer care
• Promoted to deputy checkout supervisor and then supervisor.	Staff supervision First Aid course Problem solving
• Started a family whilst still young, but continued working part time on the checkouts, still in supervisor role when staffing needs dictated.	Time management Training others on the tills Organising and negotiation skills
• When the children started full-time school increased her hours and supervised checkouts on a regular basis. Became involved in staff training regularly.	Increase range of training of others Health and Safety training
• Involved in her children's school, helping in class and involved with the PTA events.	Organisation of events Supporting small learning groups
• Became the Health and Safety rep for the shop floor. Began to inspect other parts of the store when required.	Update H & S training Introduction of change in practices within department to meet legal requirements
• Moved into the administration office supervising the checkout supervisors. Became chief co-ordinator of checkout staff.	Administration, policy and procedural knowledge acquired and developed Organisational and management skills
• Became chair person of PTA events committee.	Chairing meetings Organisation of events, including research of companies, working with local business community for sponsorship Leadership skills
• Promoted to deputy staff manager, and then manager.	Undertook further supervision training. Increasing input into staff training sessions

Example of an undergraduate CV, which has been anonymised.

It is evident from this CV that the claimant has not fully reflected upon her work and the learning opportunities provided, but has worked to identify some of her strengths and skills.

J K

Felixstowe Road, London, NX XXX
Tel: xxxx xxx 6570 Mobile: xxxxxx 825101 Email: JKxxx@aol.com

Profile

I am a highly motivated individual who is keen to learn and eager to achieve. A dedicated and enthusiastic approach towards my work coupled with an ability to organise my time and myself enables me to produce a consistent quality output.

IT / Development Skills

Microsoft Office 95 & 2000	• Word • Outlook	• Excel • Access	• Powerpoint
Other Applications	• WordPerfect for Windows • Clarisworks for Windows	• WordPerfect for DOS • Filemaker Pro	• Quattro Pro
Computer Systems	• Commercial & Financial Accounting Computer System	• Corporate Student Computer System	• EROS (NHS Ordering System) • PAS (patient Admin System)
Training Courses	• Managing Sickness Absence • Unsatisfactory Performance • Effective Minute Taking • Speaking with Confidence • Managing & resolving Conflict	• Customer Service • Grievance • Report Writing • Business Writing Course • Assertiveness Training • Appraisal Training • Conducting an Investigation	• Effective Selection • Disciplinary • P Mail • Recruitment/Selection • Budget Management • Diversity Training

Work History

2000 – to date **Mxxx Hospital**
Office Manager and PA to the Chief Executive Officer /Chairman of the Trust

Responsible for the effective day-to-day management of the Chief Executive, Chairman, Non Executive, Directors, Executive Directors and the supervision of 10 Trust Board Secretariat. Ensuring that Trust business is effectively conducted through a full, comprehensive, confidential Personal Assistant and secretarial service.

Key duties includes

- To act as an Executive Assistant to the Chief Executive and Chairman in managing the work of the Trust Board and its

committees.

- Co-ordinating, attending and organising the production and dissemination of all agendas and papers for the -:
  - Executive Team meetings
  - Trust Board meetings
  - Trust Management Committee meetings
  - Away Days

  Including setting the agenda, venue, travel arrangements and hospitality.
- Act as minute secretary for these meetings, producing accurate minutes in accordance with the standards set by the Trust Board. Ensure that any follow-up action is undertaken.
- Control the Trust Board Business Management and Trust Board Secretariat budget, ensuring that all authorised spending is correctly coded and approved for payment.
- To ensure the maintenance of records and information relating to the work of the Trust Board and its committees.
- Communications - internal and external. Promoting active sharing of information and good news and enhancing the reputation of the Trust.
- Supervising the Trust Board secretariat of which includes the management of
  - Formulating personal development needs and appraisals
  - Recruiting and training high calibre PA and secretarial staff
  - Providing clear leadership, direction and motivation for staff
  - Ensuring that all staff have the opportunity for development and training
  - Hold and manage regular team meetings
  - Monitor and manage workload, annual leave stationery and general office duties
- To ensure that staff are managed and developed as appropriate, in particular setting personal objectives through regular appraisal in line with the Trust Objectives.

1999 – 2000 **Hospital – Team Leader- Pathology Department**

- Supervise, co-ordinate and facilitate the provision of high quality and cost effective secretarial and administrative service for Pathology
- To develop and implement procedures to improve service delivery
- Promoting data quality and information issues. Assisting with performance monitoring and ensuring adherence to protocols and performance standards are met
- Provide a comprehensive and confidential PA and secretarial service to Microbiology /Pathology department which includes managing diaries of 3 consultants
- Supervision of 10 administration staff of which includes
  - Staff appraisal and development
  - Staff training in the use of systems, protocols and procedures
  - Booking and monitoring of temporary staff
  - Workload management
- Work closely with clinicians and other laboratory staff and act as an effective liaison between core departments
- Attending meetings and forums as required
- Co-ordinate the production and distribution of all agendas and papers

for monthly and fortnightly meetings of Pathology. Act as a minute secretary for these meetings as well as contribution. Producing minutes and appropriate actions

1998 – 1999 **National Housing Federation - Team Secretary/Administrator (Temporary Post)**

- Provide secretarial and administrative support to the conference, training and development department.
- Responsible for administering one day conferences.
- Assist with typesetting materials for the department of Housing Today and Inside Housing, promotional material, conferences and event material.
- General administration duties such as receiving incoming telephone calls and making outgoing calls, responding to written and telephone enquiries. Sorting mail, co- ordinating the directors diaries using electronic mail.
- Composing letters.
- Developing and maintain administrative systems.
- Assist in the organising of conferences and national housing federation training courses.
- Organising travel arrangements for senior managers.
- Operating the CAS computer electronic booking system for conferences.

1994 – 1998

XXX University – PA/Information Officer to Dean of Students

- Personal Assistant to Dean of Students.
- Manage the diary of the Dean of Students.
- Administer the arrangements for the appointment of senior managers.
- Maintain annual leave records for those senior managers.
- Prepare agenda and minute the monthly meetings of senior managers and take appropriate follow-up actions.
- Developing and maintaining administrative systems and good working relationships with staff and students.
- Assist in the presentation of papers and servicing task's groups.
- Monitoring agreed budgets.
- Preparing financial statements and Progress Reports.
- Assess approaches (incoming mail, telephone calls, and personal visitors) to the Dean of students and respond directly, make referrals to other appropriate people or assist in drafting replies.
- Evaluate circulars and other papers and assist Dean of Students with action required.
- Organising meetings, conferences, room bookings, hospitality, travel arrangements abroad.
- Providing a confidential and sensitive student reception and information point.
- Preparing financial statements, progress reports and monitoring agreed budgets.
- Working under extreme pressure to tight and unmovable deadlines.
- Working using own initiative.
- Maintaining annual leave records for those senior managers who report to Head of Student Services.

1991 - 1994 **XXXX University – PA Secretary/Course Administrator to Course Director**

- Maintaining office diary.
- Developing and maintaining effective manual filing system.
- Taking minutes at steering group meetings.
- Typing reports, letters, memos, minutes.
- Answering and initiating telephone calls.
- Sending faxes and telexes.
- Organising meetings, this requires circulation and distribution of relevant papers and correspondence, room bookings.
- Purchasing officer.
- Maintaining database.
- General office duties.
- Personal Assistant to Course Director.

1988 – 1991 **Engineers & Constructors Ltd – WP Secretary**

- Secretary to 7 staff members
- Typing reports, letters, memos, proposals
- Opening and distribution of mail.
- Filing and retrieving correspondence.
- Opening and distribution of post.
- Sending faxes and telexes
- Organising travel and hotel reservations
- Telephone liaison.
- Managing Reception receiving guests, making teas and coffees.
- General office duties.

Education / Training

1983 Education Committee
MF Comprehensive School
Level 1 French Proficiency Test

1984 First Class Elementary and Advanced Stage 1
Schidegger Ten Finger Touch Typi8ng Diploma
(Private Education Evenings)

1986 Royal Society of Arts Examination Board (RSA)
Typewriting Stage 1 (Elementary Pass)

1981 - 1986 M FComprehensive School
Rxxxx
xxxxxx
West Midlands

Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE)
6 CSE's
Childcare and Development
Office Practice
Typewriting
English Language
English Literature
Social Science

16th June 1986 – 10th June 1988 Pitman Training College
Southampton Rd
London
WC

Oct 1987	Pitman Examinations Institute Typewriting Intermediate - First Class Pass
Oct 1987	Pitman Examinations Institute English for Business Communications Elementary – Pass
May 1988	Pitman Examinations Institute Office Practice Elementary – Pass
Feb 2002	Gate College Gate London Evening Courses
Feb 2002	Powerpoint – Pass
Feb 2002	Excel – Pass
Feb 2002	Microsoft Outlook – pass

Interests

Church, Swimming, Aerobics, Reading and Travelling.

This is an example of a postgraduate CV, from which a selection has been taken. This was a particularly long CV and therefore only the more recent history is included, but as you can see, it clearly identifies key learning during the claimant's career.

CURRICULUM VITAE

(Extended)

Synopsis

From being a young adult I knew to achieve job satisfaction, I would need to work with people. In the early part of my career I explored roles within social services, but to obtain a qualification I decided to enter the nursing profession in 1981. At 22 years old. I was older than the majority of my peers but this brought with it work and life experience that most contempories did not possess and held me in good stead for the challenges ahead.

Following registration as a registered nurse I followed a fast track career path being awarded a sisters post just 14 months after my first staff nurse appointment. Although I loved my direct role with patients, I was frustrated with my lack of influence to change practice and gained a post in practice development. Since the early ninety's practice development and research has been a constant theme in my career supported by a love of facilitation and teaching. In 1999 I undertook a university teaching post as a joint appointment with an acute trust. My most recent posts have been concerned with organisation development and improvement and I currently work as a Service Improvement Lead, which I find exciting and challenging.

I have been married for 17 years and have one son. When I am not working I enjoy being with my family and socialising with friends, relationships that have developed through many different networks, over varying periods of time. I also enjoy travel and holidays and keeping fit (when the opportunities are available).

Formal Professional Education

BSc (Hons) In Nursing
ENB 730
Registered General Nurse

Career Profile and Significant Learning

May 2003 – date

Currently working as a Service Improvement Lead for the Improvement Alliance. The purpose of my role is to provide expert advice and practical support in the areas of change, continuous quality improvement and organisation development. The key to this role is to build expert resource around the organisation to build capacity for sustainable change.

My specialist area of practice is in the field of patient and public involvement (PPI). I act as an expert point of contact for the trust PPI lead and staff within the organisation.

Critical Learning Point (CLP)	Learning
How to support teams to Change their practice without acting as project leader.	Previous roles within practice development had required me to act as a project leader for any new piece of work. Even though I was very familiar with the "ownership" theory of Avedis Donabedian I did not have the support to work with teams in an alternative way, other than as project leader. There was also pressure to take on the role of project lead from the clinical teams, to help alleviate some of their workload as they were feeling overburdened in their operational roles. Working with the support of my manager and other experienced staff from the Learning Alliance, I have developed the role of consultant, advising teams on an alternative approach and on developing capacity. I am clearer that my role is to lead, support and advise not to manage and action the work.
Learnt new knowledge to help the organisation develop. .	Being pro-actively managed has enabled me to legitimately find time in my diary to learn new improvement strategies. Understanding and applying the theory of feedback has made my work richer, by creating a deeper understanding of the people I work with and the impact which my behaviour has on them.
How to work in a "virtual" office and use technology to support communication.	Working from a home office has enabled me to be more flexible with my home and work life. This however has both benefits and drawbacks. Being a natural extrovert, I miss the general buzz of office life. Understanding myself through my Myres Briggs profile has enabled me to negotiate with my colleagues to keep regular face to face contact in addition to telephone and email.
Learning about myself	Myres Briggs and type 2. Understanding myself as an extrovert, where I get my energy and enthusiasm from to develop ideas. How to protect my and direct my energy appropriately because of my extrovert tendencies, I often become the rescuer in the drama triangle (Karpman 1968) moving to victim when all my energy has been drained.
Using the new patient And public involvement Structures to influence the Development of Healthcare.	Within my service improvement role, I am recognising the necessity to step back from the individual patient, and to support members of staff in utilising group power to influence change. I find this quite difficult and frustrating.

April 2002- April 2003 Organisational Development Advisor

As an Organisational Development (OD) Advisor I led the development of the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). Also the strategic lead on the Patient and Public involvement agenda, OD support to the Clinical Governance agenda.

Following a patient diagnosis of Crezfield Jacob Disease, the neurology, pathology and DOH teams identified a number of patients who had undergone surgery in the same theatre as the diagnosed patient and were potentially at risk of developing the disease. This information was leaked to the media via a DOH source and what followed was a highly

charged, volatile situation where there were few (if any) guidelines on procedure. I co-ordinated the patient aspects CJD events at South Tees for six months which was particularly challenging, required strong leadership and necessitated developing partnerships across agencies. As a learning activity I instigated an evaluative de-brief which had the potential to enable the organisation, the Department of Health and the national CJD Panel to learn from the whole experience.

This experience was one of the most stressful of my career. I felt very isolated a lot of the time and when I looked to some of my more senior colleagues for guidance and advice I found they were also struggling, isolated and concerned for their own careers. My prime concern was the patients I was there to support, but whilst endeavouring to give robust, factually correct, equitable information, I found myself compromised by one particular patient and a breakdown in trust ensued. I learnt the importance of self preservation from a few close colleagues at work and the support of my close family and friends.

CLP	**Learning**
Political naivety	I have always had a strong belief with regard to the human race that a strong moral principle runs through all of us to endeavour to be honest and open with others, especially those Individuals who are privileged to hold a position of power. My deep rooted belief was shaken in the role of "family Liaison" person. There were several incidents where the DOH and the "Expert CJD Panel" were in a position of withholding information from patients. To be in accordance with all the government white papers on patient choice and patient partnership, this information should have been given to the patients and/or their families. For the civil servants and government ministers this was paramount to political suicide and it appeared self preservation became the order of the day, with the patients needs trailing in second place. The trust was also very cautious and all information was treated as Confidential. But a core group which included myself, worked hard to ensure the patients were kept up to date with the information that was available. I learnt not to believe all I see and read and to critique situations thoroughly before committing my heart and soul.
How to lead and influence Senior members of staff	In this highly charged situation there was a anxiety about the situation amongst all the staff who were involved. I learnt by clarifying and untangling the problems I was able to gain respect from colleagues and through facilitation, utilise the skills and expertise within the group to identify action.
Acting as The patient advocate	Through both roles as PALS Manager and CJD Lead the "patient" was the critical point that I referred everything back to. I took on the role of mediator which took a considerable amount of energy to gain individuals trust. On reflection I believe the approach we took in the trust may have created a dependency which was unhealthy, because some patients and families completely resigned their own responsibility.

This AoL had lots of possible places where learning could have been shown in more depth and a full range of undergraduate level learning could easily be shown. As you read it, think how she might have explained more and demonstrated more learning. It was given10 @ L1 and 10@ L2, but could have got more and higher credits.

Appendix 2: Example of annotated AOLs

DEALING WITH CONFLICT - IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Cxxx is an ESBD Secondary School. ESBD stands for Emotional Social Behaviour difficulties. Each pupil has a statement of special educational needs and because of anti-social behaviour has been excluded from main stream school. Cxxx is their last chance to get an education and some life skills needed before venturing out in to the real world. The majority of pupils at Cxxxx have seen unnecessary and frequent violence in their short lives and therefore violent reactions to any kind of situation is their norm.

This is a helpful introduction as it sets the context of the AoL clearly.

Relevant Courses attended

In 1998 our then Head enlisted the help of Team Teach, a nationally accredited association, recognised by BILD, which deals with physical intervention - the premise of Team Teach is that physical intervention should be seen as a last resort and that 95% of all situations should be resolved through de-escalation and diffusion strategies.

The staff at Cxxx then underwent a 2 day course. This dealt with how to protect ourselves without causing physical or emotional harm to everyone involved e.g. staff and pupils.
I then went on a further 2 courses, each one for 5 days and became an Accredited Instructor in Team Teach. See evidence (Appendix 1).

This introduction to the training programme could be elaborated upon a bit more, by including a copy of the training programme if possible as evidence, and any reflections from that training that the claimant learnt at the beginning.
BILD is an acronym that may not be known to assessors – try not to use these without explanation.

Analysis of Learning

The Team Teach philosophy had reinforced my views of dealing with aggression, anger and conflict. At the time of introduction the school morale was at a low, members of staff were trying to deal with aggressive situations the best that they could, often being physically hurt, and a general feeling of not knowing how to cope was prevalent.

This is a useful place to start; giving an outline of what the situation was and the main reasons for wishing to learn something new.

I, as a member of that staff, was very aware of the impact of Team Teach. Within a very short period of time, violent and aggressive outbursts decreased rapidly, the essence being that staff felt empowered and in control. One of the aspects of Team Teach (I think the most important), is that communication is essential when dealing with a young child who has lost control. Pupils began to feel safe and this had a positive effective on the whole school ethos.

This comment about communication could lead to the creation of another AoL on communication if the claimant had appropriate learning to complement this AoL. If not, she could have explored some of the specific communications skills needed here.

The next paragraph would lend itself well to identification of the key principles that she says she knows. It's also important that the training has been delivered in different contexts as it shows transferable learning. Tracing the learning required to deliver and support the training would have added several levels of academic learning to this claim, demonstrating the progression of learning from fundamental principles through to expertise.

I am able to apply through the above courses the key principles of Team Teach to new members of staff and external visitors. I have also delivered training to various external institutions.
The procedure for delivery of these insets is as follows: I would make an appointment with the lead member of staff involved, discuss the issues that they felt needed working with, and then analyse which procedures in Team Teach were relevant, work out an action plan, do the necessary paperwork - photocopying etc. and then organise when to deliver the inset.

Each inset was assessed on individual or group needs. I am able to evaluate the needs of each inset by gathering the information i the first meeting, e.g. whether staff were being kicked, or spat at on a regular basis. These assessments would invariably include verbal abuse, avoidance tactics, bad behaviour, poor relationships etc. All these factors would be taken into account when delivering the inset.

In the process of organising the inset I would always evaluate no only the pupils needs but also the ethos of the whole school. There have been, on occasions, during my insets situations where a member of staff had had a particular incident and had nc felt supported. This invariably, would bring other factors into the equation.

Because of my own experience and the premise of Team Teach I felt confident in my ability to apply my knowledge to help resolve these problems.

At then end of each inset, I would hand out an evaluation sheet that I had designed (see Appendix 2). I would then evaluate and assess which if not all of my inset had been successful and take into account the areas which the staff felt I had not met. On the whole each inset I have delivered has been a success (See Appendix 3).

Evidence
Appendix 1 - Team Teach Certificate
Appendix 2 - Evaluation Sheet
Appendix 3 - Letters of Success

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS;
Professional Development -
Attending extensive courses on Team Teach
Analysing the requirements and needs of external organisations
Delivering Team Teach insets to Cxxxx School and other externa agencies
Effective Learning -

The ability to teach skills and promote awareness of individual and group needs.
Communication -
To be able to communicate with diverse groups e.g. Head Teachers, LSA's Education Psychologists, Teachers and of course most importantly pupils. I am confident in communicating with all walks of life.
Teamwork -

Evaluation of the needs of each group might have included a specific assessment tool or approach which could be included as evidence.

Evaluating the ethos of the school demonstrates strategic and higher level thinking – if the claimant had explained a bit about how and why she did that, it would give her more points at a higher level.

A case study would be good to illustrate application of learning here.

Before reading further, think how this claimant could have demonstrated the success of the training she had given?
What sort of things might you us to evaluate a training session and it's practical effectiveness?

The claimant has chosen to integrate the transferable skills claim into this one. Do you think she has shown these skills in this claim? Would you like to see anything else to support these?

To be able to organise team activities within these insets
To incorporate a sense of self esteem and good feeling within a whole school approach via my inset
To have the ability to listen and understand
To generate the principal that a 'whole' team approach is essential to managing conflict
IT -
To have designed and typed numerous worksheets etc. in delivering insets
Use of OHP's and handouts.

An assessor comments:
This AoL has lots of potential, but doesn't make the most of it. For example, a case illustration of the impact of the training on staff or students would show the application of learning. Being able to take the training to different settings would have benefited from examples of the types of training that differ between primary or secondary schools. The claimant may have made a claim for teaching skills separately but if not done elsewhere, she could have explored all the areas around assessing learning needs, different types of delivery of learning depending on the subject matter, and evaluation of learning and how it might differ between adults and pupils. All of that would have significantly increased both the amount and the different levels of credit.
The claimant therefore needs to develop her skills of analysis and evaluation as well as underpinning knowledge that supports her actions.

This AoL on training discusses delivery of training in different contexts, which immediately widens the potential credit levels as the skills are shown to be transferable. She was awarded 20 @ L1 and 20 @ L2 credits.

Training

Since starting work in 1980 I have found the amount and quality of training given by the various companies to be very different.
Whilst I was working in the retail environment I attended a two day course to become an in store trainer. This I felt was an excellent course and will explain later about its purpose and content.
I have trained many new members of staff in a variety of posts as I hav often been a member of staff that as been with the companies for a goo period of time.

Indicating the length of time you have been learning is a good way of showing how you have grown your own learning, so try to show how long it was and what you learnt over a period of time.

Analysis of Learning

My experiential learning in the area of training includes: -

- Different ways of training
- Amending training programmes to the learners needs/ abilities
- Getting feedback from the learner to ensure they understand
- Feeding back to appropriate manager as to learners training

❖ First Experience

In my first job as a bank clerk, the banks main way of training staff was through using "job cards".
The "job cards" were laminated A4 sized papers on how to do a specifi job.
They were often used on their own, i.e. you were given a new job to do and the job card on how to do it.
After trying out this system of learning I spoke to my line manager. I felt that the system was a good idea once a person had learnt the job by being shown, as a way of recapping, but I did not feel that it was the ideal way of learning the job initially. I felt that these "job cards" did not show you how to solve problems that might occur and they were unable to give advice.
Many people when learning a job needs one to one teaching, even if you have done a particular job in previous employment different companies have different procedures.

This is a good start to identify where you began learning, and how you developed your ideas. This also demonstrates that the claimant had reflected upon previous learning and realised that there may be better ways to learn.

❖ Explanation

With staff training I have found that it is important to explain why different aspects of the job are done and where each job fits in to the wider picture within the company.
For instance while working as a file maintenance clerk I trained new members of staff.
It was important to explain each part of the job and explain what happened if items were entered wrong, for example a wrong address ould mean that payment for goods were delayed. I always explained that if they needed to ask any further questions to ask either the line manager or myself.

A tip for good writing: when writing about a topic try to keep it all in one paragraph and only start a new line or paragraph when you change the subject

❖

There are lots of opportunities here to develop this learning. A summary of different training days could have been listed at the beginning of the AoL. The claimant could have linked some of these learning incidents to her CV to provide a context to her learning, and also identified the types of skills that she has trained others in.

❖ Training Programme

I have the ability to put together a training programme for new staff. This means taking into account the best person to teach them in a specific area and when, taking into account the timescale as to when the learner should be able to "go it alone"[12].

While I worked for the NHS this was the main way of teaching new members of staff. This was because there was many areas of work to be taught so different staff would teach different areas.

This meant having a meeting before the member of staff started to decide on who would give what training.

New members of staff were taught this way for two main reasons, which were

- There were too many jobs for one person to undertake giving the whole training.
- It was a way for each member of staff to get to know the new member of staff.

Some jobs would mean that the trainer would then "shadow" the learner to ensure understanding of the job.

❖ Shadowing

Some of the areas of learning were during term time. The main one w covering the administrative duties on the school immunisation programme.

This meant the learner would attend however many sessions needed with member of the team until they felt confident that they could atte a school on there own.

What would normally happen it this instance was that the learner wou watch the member of staff within the first and maybe the second schools, they would then, if they felt confident be watched by the member of staff to ensure their understanding.

Once they felt confident to cover the administration alone there was always the school nurses to advice them if needed.

This could have been discussed in a bit more depth by indicating the type of learning acquired by shadowing. A case study illustration could have been included to demonstrate application of learning to practice.

❖ Abilities of staff

Although everyone has different abilities it is important to remember that at times people need to "go it alone".

With regards to the school immunisation programme some members of the team felt that some schools needed two members of staff to cover the administration, myself and other members of staff felt that this was not warranted, however the manager felt that because we were offering the service it was best to have the extra cover.

The above problem arose from two members of staff that were not well organised, which was important within the schools, and they also did not communicate well with the school nurse teams. The two members o staff were also members of staff that were relocated to our office due to problems that they caused within the community clinics.

I feel that it is very important to be able to help people as much as possible to adapt their skills to the individual job. For example with regards to the above, the two members of staff could have been offered more training around organisational skills, however because of their

This is the first time that the specific task has been described. The assessor may not understand the context that the learning has been happening, so make sure you give an indication of where it is taking place. Reference to your CV or JD can do this easily.

[12] **See appendix item 28**

attitudes to people in general I feel that communication skills would not of helped.

People need to recognise their own weaknesses before they can be trained in that area.

❖ Adaptation

I have the ability to be able to adapt a training programme to the learners needs. I encourage the learner to take his or her own notes. Once I have shown the trainee what to do and explained why it is done, I encourage them to read any procedures and use them as a guide when completing a job, although procedures do not help if there are certain problems, for example technical problems.

I encourage new members of staff to either come to me if they come across a problem or to speak to their line manager.

It is very important to get to know the learners' strengths and weaknesses, this will enable you to adapt any training programme to their needs.

If for instance there were an area within a job that they are nervous about I would try to encourage them to complete that particular part of the training first.

I myself always find that I am more nervous about answering the telephone when starting a new job, most companies want you to learn other areas of the job first, however I have found that once I have answered the telephone a few my confidence grows, this then enables me to learn about the other parts of the job better.

❖ Encouragement

The most important part of training someone new within a job is to encourage him or her. Many new jobs can be very daunting, it is very important to be able to encourage new members of staff and to remember that we all have had to learn, also that we all learn at a different pace.

This I have been able to do both in the work environment and with regards to my sons' education. I have seen how encouragement can aid learning, if you are told you are doing well this gives you encouragement to keep going.

My foster child needed plenty of encouragement with his schoolwork due to his home environment and low self. When he was first placed in my care he did not take care of his appearance and he did not care about the standard of his schoolwork. I gradually taught him to look smarter; this was mainly by ensuring he had clothes that fitted him better. With regards to his schoolwork, I was very involved with ensuring that he could sit down each night quietly to concentrate on his homework. He was encouraged to ask questions, if I did not know the answer we would try to find out the answer together, either from books at home or by using the local library.

My son was five years younger, my foster son would see him with books and working on his own homework so this again was encouragement for him.

❖ Feedback

This is an important point that is being made here – how do you know where to start training? What has the claimant learnt about finding out about other people's training needs?

It is important to read your work through before submitting it. Poor presentation and spelling mistakes makes it hard for assessors to read, and they are less inclined to be generous with marks!

The claimant is making some very important points about training and motivation and feedback. She could have increased her credits if she had supported some of these statements with appropriate references related to good training techniques. Showing that you understand and know some training theory is to your advantage.

This table illustration is a good way of showing the underpinning knowledge relevant to the AoL. If you do this, make sure your

It is very important to give the person you are training feedback and to discuss any further training with them….

❖ Types of Training

It is very important to understand the type of training that is needed and available…..
Training can be given in two basic ways, one-to-one or in groups; the following table shows the advantages of both.

One-to-One	Group
Can be tailored to the individuals needs	Can lead to more discussions
More opportunity to ask questions	Learn from each others experiences
Get to know each other	Excellent way to ensure that changes in procedures are known by everyone
Excellent way for new members of staff to learn	Mandatory training such as Health and Safety can be given to a wider audience

❖ Training in public

Having trained people in retail work, this often meant training new members of staff in the publics view, for example till training….

Having trained people on the till enabled me to see that sometimes it is easier to break a job down.

Again, here is a good example of showing relevant knowledge, but where's it from?

❖ In-Store Trainer

Whilst working within the shop it was decided that they wanted a member of staff to be able to read updated/new procedures and then train other staff.
I was chosen for this has I had a good experience of work in the different departments; I had also been with the company for a number o years and had trained new members of staff.
The training involved attending a two-day course in Birmingham….
A good group training sessions should contain the following:-

1. An introduction by the trainer/s –A brief introduction from each learner –
2. Health and Safety –
3. Whole Group Discussions –
4. Splitting into Smaller Groups –
5. Role Play –
6. Breaks –.

This section has been edited, but you can see that the claimant is considering a wide range of things that training includes and involves, thus demonstrating appropriate knowledge underpinning her claim.
What sort of evidence could be included to support this?

❖ As a Parent

Another area in which I have learnt about teaching/training is that of helping my son with his schoolwork.

When he was first in the infants…
When he was in junior school …

This is another area where the claimant is demonstrating her knowledge over a period of time, which can contribute to the amount of credits she can be awarded.

Once he started secondary school…
My son will soon be going to college to start his A Level course ….

Summary

I feel that through my own learning experiences, I am now able to train other people confidently…..

An assessor says:
This claim was quite long and descriptive in places, but it showed a lot of learning in different contexts and demonstrated how her learning had progressed over time. She could have maximised her credits by;

- ensuring the context that training was given was explicit,
- giving an indication of the time period
- been more analytical and made a bit more of the illustrations of application of learning in different contexts
- used some theory or referenced some of the statements and sources of learning

Appendix 3

Example of a reflective cycle -(Adapted from Boud et al (1985), the WHAT format of structured reflection).

? WHAT (Returning to the situation)

- Is the purpose of returning to this situation
- exactly occurred in your own words? (Describe or write)
- did you see? did you do?
- was your reaction?
- did other people do, e.g. colleague, client?
- do you see as the key aspects of this situation?

? SO WHAT (understanding the context)

- were your feelings at the time?
- are your feelings now? Are there differences? Why?
- Good emerged from the situation, e.g. self or others?
- Troubles you, if anything?
- Were your experiences in comparison to others?
- are the main outcomes for you?

? NOW WHAT (modifying the outcomes)

- are the implications for you,
- needs to happen to change the situation?
- are you going to do now?
- happens if you decide not to alter anything?
- might you do differently if in a similar situation again?
- information do you need to cope with a similar situation again?

Appendix 4

Example reflective essay

I want this module to give me the recognition I deserve for the job that I do but, probably more importantly, it will be for self recognition.

My main concern was time. I am a single mum with 2 grown up children, one of them, I am proud to say, has just started University. My job is relentless - the word 'easy' is never associated with working with ESBD children. I live with my partner and generally lead quite a full life, so the question was how was I going to fit all this in?

Despite all these pressures in terms of time and my anxieties, the overriding motivation for me to embark on this course was to receive validation for doing a very difficult job but one that I believe I do well.

What I did know was that whatever I needed to do had to wait until after my school's Ofsted Inspection. This was happening on the 18th October for about 3-4 days. There was absolutely no point or time to even think about University until after this. Hence I put my notes in my 'new' school bag and forgot about them.

Ofsted came and went (it was very successful for the school and also for me personally) and I then tried to get back on track with this module. My colleague and I had a few discussions where we were both aware of time slipping away. I was aware that I was quite apprehensive because of the time lapse, but my colleague and I decided not to stress but to make the next tutorial our starting date.

My next and last tutorial happened on the 9th November 2004. I found this very informative and walked away thinking I knew exactly what I had to do. I began to think in detail about my work, and to analyse my strengths and weaknesses. This process was extremely helpful, now I was not just thinking, my about concern was time.

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Personal reflection upon preparing a claim for the recognition and accreditation of prior and work based learning.

I went to my first tutorial on the 5th October with no preconceived ideas of what actually was going to occur. I went with a colleague from work who was also taking this module. We actually resembled a couple of school girls, a bit giggly and apprehensive at the same time. It was quite impressive that there was such a mixture of different people attending. Some were in education, some in fitness and even some in politics. I did wonder at the time how this module was supposed to fit everybody's needs.

I wrote a lot of notes during this first tutorial but was not really aware of what was required, I think more to do with my nerves than the tutor's session. Despite eight and half years working at CXXXXX School, initially as a classroom assistant and eventually becoming an unqualified teacher with responsibility for a whole area of curriculum delivery, I had never experienced a formal learning process for myself since leaving school. Consequently the whole idea of doing a degree course was somewhat intimidating. It was a new venture but on unfamiliar territory.

I believe I am 'bright' but do not have an academic background. I had a turbulent childhood, moving to numerous different schools and neighbourhoods, no consistency and a lack of interest from my parent in my education. At 16 I left home and school with only a few qualifications. As a result, all through my working life I have felt the need to try harder due to my lack of academic qualifications and the lack of confidence from job that I do but began breaking it down into specific areas.

My first target was to write up an action plan, and although it was generally kept to, there were times, because of life's interruptions, that I did not get a chance to complete any work. I was very aware though of time and found myself saying 'I've only got so many weeks left'.

I then had to think about an expanded CV and job description. This was actually quite

enlightening as my list became longer and longer. I remember thinking 'I actually do quite a lot!' I enjoyed doing this activity. More importantly it gave me confidence - I knew that my experiences and successes were tangible.

The next step was to choose areas of learning. This I found quite difficult as a lot of what I do overlaps. In the end I realised that the only way to get over this hurdle was to actually write up what I know. I really enjoyed working on my areas and during this time came to realise that I had lots of strengths which had only come to light because of the module.

I have realised because of working on one of my areas of learning - classroom teaching - that although I knew I was a good teacher, I now know why. It is because I have high expectations of myself and the pupils, that I always teach in a non judgemental way, respond positively to the pupils in all situations and that I am capable of making a difference.

I find this quote about teaching very powerful;

'I've come to the frightening conclusion that
I am the decisive element in the Classroom.
It's my personal approach that creates the climate,
It's my daily mood that makes the weather.
As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power
To make a child's life miserable of joyous
I can be a tool of torture,
Or an instrument of inspiration.
I can humiliate or humour, hurt or heal.
In all situations, it is my response that decides,
Whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated
And a child humanised or de-humanised.

Haim Ginott from the 'Learners Dimension'

I find it easy to relate this to my own experiences as a child and pupil, and also as a teacher.

I believe that this module has helped me analyse both my own personal teaching style and how that impacts on pupil's learning styles.

The first area of learning that I completed, (dealing with conflict), I emailed to my Tutor, and anxiously waited for his reply. He was complimentary in his comments and I felt that this was the boost I needed to get me motivated and enthused. As a result my work ratio for this module became more consistent because I now had the confidence to know that I was on the 'right track'. I have to say though, during my endless hours at the computer, that I have had insecurities about my abilities to put forward what is needed. This relates back to my earlier statement about a lack of positive educational experiences in earlier life.

I know what I know but it can sometimes be very difficult for me to put it on paper. This I found quite an obstacle but I obviously persevered! In doing this module I have discovered a stubbornness and dogmatism in myself - a desire to overcome obstacles.

During this time I spent a lot of time talking with my colleague at work about what we thought was required. We spent one evening reading through the resource pack book - it is quite funny how people view words, comments, even paragraphs, very differently. Invariably my colleague and I would have a giggling fit, I am sure out of nerves more that anything else. This was a venture that was new to both of us. What did happen though, was that through talking with my colleague about this module, it became an exercise of sharing our concerns and enjoying each other's success at completing a piece of work. We would read each others work and make, hopefully, positive comments about the work and how if needed, it could be changed for the better. This process emphasised to me the importance of teamwork - encouragement, learning from others, sharing ideas.

The hardest area of learning was 'delivering insets'. I am actually very good at doing this but I found it a challenging task. I think I felt it was a 'you had to be there' moment. It was a difficult exercise for me to put on paper and at one point I thought I should change this area of learning.

However because I am confident in this activity I wanted to share it. The benefit of completing this module has helped me to be aware of different ideas and strategies that I can use to improve my inset deliveries.

I have to say that I do feel more confident in my ability to plan, organise and in fact deliver work that is required in this module and indeed in my workplace.

I am quite an organised person by nature - a place for everything, everything in its place - so finding evidence was not going to be a problem. How wrong I was. During this module I have had building works going on in my house, so everything was everywhere but in its place! I managed to find as much as I could under the bricks and dust, the rest was thankfully at school.

I always been quite confident in my communication skills, and found that when I was applying my transferable skills in my areas of learning that communication was definitely a strong factor. It was quite hard trying to work out other transferable skills that you have. A lot of my skills overlapped into each transferable skill. Obviously one of the weaknesses I found even more apparent were my IT skills. This is definitely something for me to look into in the future. However there have been learning benefits including communicating through email, the collation and presentation of my portfolio and even the use of a digital camera!

I think because of my job and what it entails - dealing with staff and pupils who can all behave badly at times, teaching Citizenship and PSHE to every pupil in the school, delivering insets, being a Head of Year, having three members of staff under my wing - communication is my strongest point. Nevertheless the module has illustrated the importance of communication skills and the necessity of never becoming complacent in how I deal with people. It is an ongoing process.

I have had a lot of moral support from my workplace, my partner, and my family, and this has definitely helped me deal with areas of academia that I never thought I would get the opportunity to explore. It is interesting, encouraging and a source of inspiration to know that people want to help.

I found this module at times to be quite a strain, whether because of time factors or my lack of confidence in the idea that I was actually a University student. What I can honestly say is that as this module comes to an end I have enjoyed all aspects of self analysis. I have found out so many things about myself not least that I actually like being in the education system.

As for my aspirations, well during this module I discovered a confidence in myself that I liked. I have a lot to give, least of all compassion, caring and a clear understanding of all diversities.

I do not have an inclination to become a Head Teacher - there's too much paperwork and not enough hands on with staff and pupils - but by getting my degree and becoming a fully qualified teacher. The world is my oyster!

Personal reflection upon preparing a claim for the recognition of specific credit through the accreditation of prior and work based learning.

As an individual, I have always wanted to do my best whether as a mother, singer in my music group, working with youth leading a youth band or being a nurse. When I started nursing over 25 years ago I felt that if I could be a senior staff nurse I would 'have made it'! Not ever being particularly academically minded, I now look back and reflect over all I have done and realise I have far exceeded my original 'plans' and my thirst for nursing and improved patient/learner nurse care/management continues ever strong. Brownhill SA (1997) stated "As health professionals we are obliged to continue our quest for better, more effective patient care". I continue to strive for this still, and am now looking to attain my BSc in Nursing as an affirmation of the progress I have made.

Work based learning (WBL) was decided on as the method for the final stage of accreditation, as I had already taken some negotiated time to start the final part of my degree a year ago, and my practice area was currently short of nursing staff. I also felt that I would be able to put some protected time aside at home to study. My initial expectations however were under-estimated, with an expectancy that WBL would not need as much time as a regular module which involved attending set days as well as setting time aside to reflect, research etc, and there wouldn't be so much work required. This changed dramatically when I realised how much information would be required to provide evidence to cover the wide and varied diversities of working as a healthcare team member today. I would need to show the level of improvement, progression in learning and also the various skills developed over time, especially in information technology, using the internet and developing computer skills to reduce the amount of paper that we generate. I currently work in a paper-light general surgery, which means that all our records of disinfection and sterilising/recording of equipment, calibrations etc are being developed on computer spreadsheets. Our protocols, be it clinical or managerial are also now on a computer intranet that is accessible from all terminals by all personnel within the practice. Therefore I also reflected on how my basic knowledge and care has had to spread laterally and take in a range of new skills in technology, encouraged by the Government and The Department of Health.

My action plan also stated that I wanted to reflect on my weaknesses in relation to clinical, educational and managerial aspects so that I could address them and help other learners as well as patients. In reflecting on these aspects, I surprised myself, in that I also had strengths that I had not fully appreciated, and this was a positive reflection in increasing my personal confidence in all aspects of my care and management.

Assembling the claim and evidence was time-consuming. The amount of work required was much larger than I had originally anticipated, but I have to admit it also gave me a 'buzz'. I was putting time aside to see what I had done and how I had done it and the thought of being able to use this to address a way forward began to excite me. In today's fast moving world, especially in Primary Care at present with the General Medical Services (GMS) Contract, having to make time to reflect and review where I am now, what I am actually doing now and looking at where I'd like to be was the main driving force to complete the WBL programme. However, I did need to evaluate the time management issue, as it became clear I would need more protected time to do my best. I therefore took some annual leave and time owed so that I could concentrate fully on my portfolio and the evidence required. This was an effective choice, which enabled me to spend several hours together, instead of only one or two at a time, and this allowed me to give more in depth assessment of what I was trying to achieve and how best to present my portfolio and make it clear and easy to progress through. I also found it hard to actually get started and I think was because I had no previous experience of anything like this before. Distance Learning is accessible for most courses these days but it was a real challenge to me. It was a bonus not having to travel so much, given the problems travel can cause, and obtaining access to support through email was very different. When you are preparing to attend a study session you have protected time, several hours in which to concentrate on that particular subject and getting feedback/networking is on-going during that allotted time period. Distance learning means you have to make that time even though you can choose when that time is best to fit into your personal schedule. However, even though email is relatively easy to access, you may not get an instant answer and may need to wait a few days. This I found, during my specific time off to concentrate on this module, to be a hindrance, as I sometimes had to wait some time for an answer, and I wasn't always sure if I was on the right track in

order to continue. On reflection, this is an area that I need to continue to work at, I need to be more flexible, able to change pathways, address other on-going aspects of my work while I wait for answers. Healthcare never runs smoothly with instant answers and therefore, although I had not expected to learn about time management, feeling I had no real issues there, it was enlightening to look at it from a new perspective.

The skills I started with during this module haven't really changed or grown but I been able to assess the improvement in all areas of clinical, educational and managerial skills. I am always improving my clinical/educational knowledge base as I read several journals regularly, which are sent to me, and I also attend updates/study days on various issues that are relevant to my practice. I must admit I have never really thought about improving my managerial skills, but on reflection, I lead a multi-skilled staff group of Healthcare Assistants (HCA), Practice Nurses (PN) and regularly assist and instruct both reception and medical staff, showing that I work as a team member and take a lead role in my areas of expertise. I have instigated educational/clinical practice for HCA's and PN's in wound management and ear care and aim to give baseline knowledge to the care that is given. Through researching and writing both clinical and managerial protocols I have been able to inform doctors of the research found and have written a protocol for Urinary Tract Infection that incorporated reception staff in asking relevant questions that could fast-track patients to the correct practitioner. I am also using the internet much more than I did, not having previously been 'computer friendly' and from this basis I have gained increased confidence to 'surf the net'. This has been a great bonus as I am now able to show others how to use the internet for their own research or information. I have found that we can access this from work and use some of the online literature for patients. I have also networked with healthcare colleagues on this topic, and the chief Primary Care Trust Pharmacist is looking into Travel health advice from the Scottish site Travax for the Trust. Having recently also been updating and improving my knowledge base of Diabetes I have been able to access much more diverse information from the internet with relevant Web sites such as The Neuropathy Trust website, which can be accessed by Diabetic patients with neuropathy who can gather information for themselves as there are both patient and professional pages.

As a reflective practitioner I have recognised how much I actually know and have learnt, especially in the last 7 years since starting my studies. I have increased my knowledge, my skills and I have extended this knowledge in breadth as well as depth, and been able to transfer it to both patients and colleagues. This has also increased my confidence in myself and I actually feel better able to impart this knowledge to others. I have had to perform appraisals for nursing colleagues recently and the positive feedback I received from them in all aspects of care and management helped boost my confidence and has steered me to looking for better ways of improving their knowledge, skills and education and to encourage them to support this with relevant courses and study.

I have also been encouraged by my nursing, medical and university colleagues to pursue this degree, as they feel I have developed so much and continue to seek more knowledge that I can use for my patients and nursing colleagues. I believe that my networking across different agencies and boundaries within the healthcare system has increased over the years and this has continued to be a growing asset to my care and knowledge base.

It was not difficult to identify the learning outcomes from my previous studies, as I had kept all of my coursework, but to show continuing evidence of the improvements I had made seemed difficult at first. However, as I went through my records and looked at my practice, I realised that the evidence could keep permanently growing, and it amazed me how much I had actually done and achieved since starting my diploma courses. I was always selective about the path I chose for further education. I steered away from University pathways, which often seemed more to do with academia than hands on practice, and I wanted only to do courses that were relevant to my actual practice. I feel that I have achieved this and that this has enhanced my work tremendously in essentially practical ways. As I continued to look for evidence I realised how I wanted to continue learning but needed to look at making reflection and learning part of my routine, in the same way that I would advise a patient to make exercise part of their weekly routine, so that I can always have a little time to look back, reflect, critically appraise and then address a way forward to keep improving my knowledge, care, education and management.

The development of the portfolio and my reflection have positively influenced and encouraged the way I view myself, my role and my career aspirations. My confidence has increased

immensely and I doubt it would have so much without my having spent this time looking at all aspects of my career and present employment. As a team member I hadn't fully realised how much people look to me for all the information, knowledge and experience that I have developed over the years and this has been both one of the biggest surprises and most positive aspects of this module. From this module I have also realised exactly where I want to go with my career. I intend to stay in General Practice working with patients 'hands on' and guiding other clinical members in their own development. My tutor is aware that I find continuing education through universities difficult, mainly because I find the academic aspects difficult and frustrating at times, and although it has its place I feel that sometimes it is over-emphasised and not all necessary**.** However, without the academic rigour, I would and could not have achieved as much as I have and without my tutors continued support over the years I would not have accomplished as much as I have. Which brings me back to my opening comments based on Brownhill S. (1997) statement, " As health professionals we are obliged to continue our quest for better, more effective patient care". I now feel qualified to include myself with the other learners in this statement and will continue with my regular updates and study days, as this is where I receive the ever-changing healthcare information I need and am able to network with colleagues. Also, through the newly devised Nurse Practitioner Forum within our PCT, I believe I will be able to help influence and shape future practice. This module has confirmed my place within my chosen career of nursing and I am grateful for this.

REFERENCE:

Brownhill SA. (1997) Our flexible friend. Managing Diabetes. Vol 2; issue 1, p7-8.

Appendix 10 Conference Abstracts for Dissemination

SEEC Case Study for 17th May 2007

Beyond boundaries: Assessing Experiential Learning outside module templates
Barbara Workman

This case study will present part of a current action research project which is developing a model for assessing credit volume of experiential learning claims. The research is set within the Middlesex University accreditation of experiential learning (APEL) undergraduate module and explores ways in which academics assess credit volume as part of a work based learning studies award.

APEL is usually claimed against specific modules of which the credit level and weight is pre-determined, usually to allow access or progression within standard programmes. Middlesex WBL programme allows students to make an APEL claim for general credit as a starting point. The assessment of this credit is undertaken using specifically designed Level Descriptors which provide an analytical framework for assessing academic levels within an APEL claim. However, there is no framework beyond the universities module stock against which to measure as to how to award volumes of credit. The use of the notion of 1 credit per 10 hours of study does not equate with work based learning where learning can take an undetermined length of time, nor do standard modules provide an exact match. This project therefore sought to identify the tacit knowledge that assessors use in assessing the volumes of credit, as part of a larger project exploring the experiences of participants undertaking APEL. This approach may also have applicability to participants who are involved in drafting learning agreements with students and who are involved in negotiating work based learning projects with students.

The consequent model has been through several iterations and is due to be fully integrated within the Teaching and Learning activities of the module.
This case study invites participants to consider:

- Could this model contribute to other WBL practices?
- The tacit knowledge of assessors and facilitators in scoping work based projects
- Is there a need/ use of a similar model elsewhere?

Appendix 10 (cont)

SEEC Annual conference 22nd June 2007

Pushing the boundaries of accrediting experiential learning

Workshop proposal Pauline Armsby & Barbara Workman

This workshop will consider innovative uses of APEL using two case studies as illustrations of accreditation of learning at Undergraduate and Doctoral levels. Common uses of APEL involve APEL as access or advanced standing onto undergraduate programmes. This workshop will explore using accreditation within two differing academic awards; professional doctorates towards an award of Doctorate in Public Works and accreditation at undergraduate level, where the use of accreditation is outside module templates which usually prescribe levels and amounts of learning for accreditation.

APEL is usually claimed against specific modules of which the credit level and weight is pre-determined, usually to allow access or progression within standard programmes. However, Middlesex WBL programme allows students to make an APEL claim for general credit as a starting point, which is then used to build a personalised programme, and in the case of the Doctorate, claims can be made for learning through specific projects which can contribute to or be equated to a whole doctorate award.

These case studies provide illustrations of using accreditation in innovative ways. The first case study will explore the tacit knowledge that assessors use in assessing the volumes of credit, as part of a larger project exploring the experiences of participants undertaking an APEL module. The second case study will consider assessment of accreditation at high level learning within a module template (540 credits at level 5) as used in a professional doctorate (DProf) by public works, which is a sister programme to the PhD by published works.

We will explore the usefulness of this model for helping assess accreditation. By reference to these widely differing applications of the model we hope to raise issues of relevance such as the definition of boundaries in knowledge and experiential learning, to the practice of assessing APEL.

Appendix 11 Learning Activity Action Plan

Draft Outline of Action Plan for WBS undergraduate RAL module

By week 6 you should have completed the following:

1. An annotated CV showing the skills you have learnt in each job, particularly your work in the most recent 2-5 years
2. An up to date job description. If you have more that one job role, or have changed jobs in the last two years, include both job descriptions
3. An action plan up to 500 words.

The action plan should:

- List intended titles of the areas of learning you have identified so far
- List the evidence you are planning to use with a brief explanation as to why you have chosen each piece
- Discuss briefly at least 2 level descriptors (see section 11 of subject handbook & section 2.3.1 of RAL resource pack) and 2 volume descriptors (Section 8.10 of RAL resource pack) that you will use in your claim. Briefly explain how you will aim to use them for one area of learning in your claim.

Submit the action plan to Oasisplus in the specified Discussion Topic Area: 'Action Plan Discussion' for feedback from peers and your adviser. Reflect on the feedback from this and write a paragraph as to how you will now progress your RAL claim. Include a copy of your completed action plan in your final portfolio submission.

Appendix X: Example of an action plan from RAL resource pack

Name: Harry Hawkes

Job role: Teaching assistant

Deadline dates: portfolio due in January 7th, 2008
Other deadlines: 6 week complete action plan for Oasisplus = 29th October 2007
Christmas and New Year at weeks 15 & 16 - complete draft areas of learning by 1st Dec for adviser feedback
Finish portfolio by 18th Dec, Write Reflective essay 27-31st December
Home and work commitments: Half term 22/20 – 26/10/07

Possible titles for areas of learning:

1. CPD
2. Lesson planning
3. Behaviour for learning

List of evidence to be used:

In -service training course certificates
School exam results
Lesson planning examples
Scheduled lesson observations
Vocational review

Letters from college
Managing student behaviour
Behaviour Audit

Assessment criteria: Level descriptors

I will use these in lesson planning
A2 – selection and justification of approaches to task: I demonstrate how and why I made a choice of different teaching strategies such as directed and self directed learning activities
B2 - self appraisal/ reflection on practice – Discussions with my mentor and reflection on student engagement with the learning task changed the way I delivered this and other sessions, and what I learnt from it
C2 – effective use of resources – I will show how and why I was able to use different learning resources to encourage visual and kinetic learning activities

Volume descriptors

I will use these in lesson planning

- Recognition of incremental learning - I will show how I have learnt over the 6 years in the job role and how my understanding of teaching and learning has grown and changed over that time
- Presented in components – I have four specific incidents that contributed to my learning about lesson plans, inset days, teaching observations, student evaluations and my mentor's tutorial
- Explicit products – my lesson activities for PSHE have been used across the year group so I will include these as evidence and explain how I developed them